

Joshua 3:7-17

⁷The LORD said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. ⁸You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, ‘When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’” ⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.” ¹⁰Joshua said, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹²So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.” ¹⁴When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. ¹⁵Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

Psalms 107:1-7, 33-37 (UMH 830)

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.
²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble
³and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
⁴Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town;
⁵hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
⁶Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress;
⁷he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town.
³³He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground,
³⁴a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants.
³⁵He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water.
³⁶And there he lets the hungry live, and they establish a town to live in;
³⁷they sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield.

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

⁹You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. ¹¹As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, ¹²urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

¹³We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

Matthew 23:1-12

¹Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

Humble Servants

Everyone likes to feel important - to be liked and respected and admired by others. It is a natural human tendency. We all enjoy basking in the admiration of other people.

Many people also enjoy following the lives and activities of rich, powerful and famous people. There is a worldwide industry worth billions of dollars a year satisfying this urge. Think of all the books, magazines and television shows devoted to celebrities, movie stars, sports figures, and other rich and famous people. Magazines like *People*, *Us*, and *Sports Illustrated*, and television shows like *Entertainment Tonight* are examples that come to mind.

But at the same time there is another opposite human tendency - the tendency to enjoy when the rich, famous, and powerful are taken down a notch. Although most of us feel like we are decent, loving individuals - many of us secretly find joy in the problems of celebrities. There is a German word, *schadenfreude*, that means “delight in another person's misfortune.” I have to admit that I have feelings of *schadenfreude* sometimes, and I bet that other people do also. Look at the people that were overjoyed when Martha Stewart was convicted of insider trading and sent to prison for several months.

A Texas rancher met up with a Wisconsin dairy farmer. The two men began talking about their land and the milkman told the cattleman that he operated his dairy business on 125

acres. The Texan scoffed at such a small parcel of land. He said, "Yankee, that ain't nothin'. On my ranch I can get in my truck at sunrise and I won't reach the fence line of my property until sunset." The dairy farmer snorted, "Yeah, I used to have a truck like that."

In this week's scripture passage from Matthew, Jesus takes the Pharisees down a notch. The Pharisees were celebrities of their time - rich, important. They sat at the head of the table at banquets, and in the front of the synagogue. Just like many people today, the Pharisees wanted others to see them as special and treat them as though they were closer to God than anyone else. They wanted others to be impressed with their piety and their holiness. They were chest thumpers who said, "Hey, look at me! Look at how important I am! See how broad my phylacteries are and how long my fringes are?"

Phylacteries are leather boxes containing scrolls inscribed with passages of scripture. In Deuteronomy it says *"You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead"* (Deut. 11:18). In obedience to this law, the scribes and Pharisees wore phylacteries on their forehead and their arm. The phylacteries served as a constant reminder of God's law, and included certain passages of the law from Exodus and Deuteronomy (Exodus 13:1-16; Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21). Deuteronomy also requires Jews to write the laws *"on the doorposts of your house and on your gates"* (Deut. 11:20) -- a law that observant Jews still obey by fastening a Mezuzah containing these laws on the doorpost of their homes. A Mezuzah identifies a home as Jewish and its inhabitants as observant. It also serves as a constant reminder to children and others of God's law.

Tassels or fringes are required by Num. 15:37-41 and Deut. 22:12, and are intended to remind people of God's commandments. Jesus wears such a fringe on his garments (9:20; 14:36). Phylacteries and tassels were like stained glass windows or icons -- intended to help people, especially illiterate people, to remember and to understand spiritual things. They were not simply a good idea, but they are God's idea, laid down by God in the Torah. The problem is not that the scribes and Pharisees observed these Torah laws, but that they sought personal honor for doing so. They wore especially large phylacteries and long tassels to draw attention to their scrupulous observance.

A man, returning from a business trip, was met at the airport by his wife. They walked from the gate together and were standing waiting for the baggage to be unloaded. An extremely attractive stewardess walked by. Suddenly, the man came to life. Beaming, he said to the stewardess, "I hope we can fly together again, Miss Jones." His wife asked, "How come you knew the name of that stewardess?" The man replied smoothly, "Well dear, her name was posted up front in the plane, right under the names of the pilot and the co-pilot." To which the wife replied, "Okay, so what were the names of the pilot and co-

pilot?"

Just like when we enjoy when the businessman is taken down a notch by his wife, the people that Jesus preached to probably enjoyed when he took the Pharisees down a notch.

Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something he or she isn't. I'm sure we all know people like that. I read about a man who, when asked by a pastor why he didn't come to church with his family, replied, "Because the church is filled with hypocrites." To which the pastor responded, "That's okay. There's always room for one more."

Or the story of a pompous-looking deacon was trying to impress upon a class of boys the importance of living the Christian life. "Why do people call me a Christian?" the man asked. After a moment's pause, one youngster said, "Maybe it's because they don't know you."

So I think it is fair to say that Jesus doesn't want us to be hypocrites and he doesn't want us to be pompous. But what does Jesus want us to be? He wants us to be humble and be servants. In Matthew, Jesus says: ¹¹*The greatest among you will be your servant.* ¹²*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Well how do we become humble servants? Reverend Billy Strayhorn has a personal example of someone he thinks is a humble servant. He writes:

"I will never forget Grace Little. Her first name described her spirit and her last name described her stature. She was a rather small woman with a big heart and an even bigger spirit. Every time the doors opened, Grace was there. Not because she had to be but because she wanted to be. She loved the Lord with every ounce of her soul. She loved working for the Lord and thought it a privilege to help set up or clean up or just attend any function at the Church. So, Grace was always there.

Grace was on a very fixed income. Grace was a retired school employee. She had run the High School Cafeteria for years. With what little that paid and her Social Security, Grace didn't have a whole lot of money. I know exactly how much Grace received each month because Grace tithed.

Not only did she tithe but Grace always gave a memorial gift to the Church when someone she knew died. It was never much, only five dollars, but it was every bit as blessed as anyone else's gift.

Grace's offerings didn't stop there. Whenever there was a Potluck supper or luncheon,

Grace always brought two dishes: a home-made chocolate chip pecan pie and a hash brown casserole. Everybody liked the casserole so much and Grace brought it so often that everyone started calling it Grace's potatoes.

For a long time, no one knew that Grace's pie was a chocolate chip pecan pie. They all thought it was mincemeat. And I was the only one who took any. Grace would always leave the leftover pie in the refrigerator for her pastor to snack on the rest of the week. That is until Coach found out what kind of pie it was.

But Grace's greatest act of stewardship, service and sacrifice were her birthday and anniversary cards. This was Grace's love and passion. We printed a list of the birthdays and anniversaries in our newsletter. Grace would send everyone a birthday or anniversary card. We tried to help her by giving her boxes of generic cards. You know the 100 for two dollars kind. Grace wouldn't take them. Grace delighted in going to the card shop and selecting cards just for each person. She prayed for them while she was selecting them and while she was filling them out. And then when she mailed them.

All of her spare money went for this project. Her kids would send her extra money to help with the air conditioning during the summer, Grace used it to buy more cards. One of the young girls in the church gave Grace a wonderful gift one year for her birthday. She gave her two rolls of stamps.

Grace had a huge impact on the life of that Church and on my life. When Grace died, they found her, lying in bed. Her Bible was open and laying on the bed next to her. It was obvious she had just been reading it. And her hands were folded in prayer.

When her children came, they found three months worth of birthday cards. The cards were already addressed, signed and dated. You see, Grace would pencil in the date that the card needed to be mailed under where the stamp would go, so that everyone would get their card on or before their birthday.

Grace's family honored their mother by mailing all of those cards. They took time to add a little note to each one explaining that Grace had picked out the card for the person before she died. Grace died in June. Both of my sons received birthday cards in July.

What made Grace so special? Grace did what the Pharisees in this passage didn't do. Although she was one, Grace never thought of herself as a Saint. She only thought of herself as a steward and a servant. Grace let the light of God shine through her. And when she did, lives were influenced and changed.”

Over the years, I have had the pleasure of meeting several people like Grace, and the even greater pleasure of being related to some of them. If you have belonged to a church for any length of time, you have met someone like Grace also. They are the people that keep the church running year after year, as pastors come and go, and as other members arrive and leave.

Billy goes on to say: *"And one of the great truths of the faith is that servants usually become saints. It's not something they strive for, it's just something that happens. Servants simply strive to serve God.*

It's funny how children instinctively know that. I'll never forget Morgan, a little girl in one of our former churches. She was about four. Mom and Dad were just starting to teach her about giving. As the ushers came down the aisle with the offering plates, Morgan asked her mom what was happening. Mom told her, "They are taking up the offering, and when they get here you can put your quarter in the offering plate."

Morgan replied, "But this quarter is for Jesus." Mom explained how, by putting her quarter in the offering plate she was giving it to Jesus. And she told about all the ways in which her gift would be used for God's work. As the plate came down her pew, Morgan carefully put her quarter in the plate, then turned to her Mom, and loud enough for everyone in the whole congregation to hear, asked, "If that money is for Jesus, why wasn't there more in the plate?"

Humble servants come in all sizes, shapes and colors - and have all kinds of callings. Some are like Grace Little who serve in the church year after year. And some are like Randy Grim, who felt a different calling. I found Randy's story in the August, 2004 issue of Guideposts magazine, when Carol pointed it out to me:

Read "A Stray's Best Friend"

When Jesus said:

*"The greatest among you will be your servant.
All who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and all who humble themselves will be exalted."*

He wasn't telling us how the world works, but how God works. We will see that fully

revealed when we get to heaven, but by the grace of God we sometimes see it now as well.

There is something in all of us that wants to be like the Pharisees -- proud and selfish. But there is also something in us that wants to be like Grace Little or Randy Grim -- serving and selfless. Christ calls us to fight the selfish part and to nurture the selfless part. He said, "The greatest among you will be your servant." And he said, "All who humble themselves will be exalted." Try living a servant life, and you will find yourself both blessing and blessed.

Thanks be to God!