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## **The Ministry of Grace**

Luke 18:14

Today's Scripture text has special meaning for Kansas Jayhawk fans. Jesus said "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled. Those who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 18:4)." For many years the Kansas University football season has been an exercise in humility and spiritual preparation for the real season of basketball. But last night for the first time since 1909 a Kansas football team went 8-0. Today Kansas fans are struggling to see themselves differently.

A similar kind of adjustment was undergone by a 27 year old named John Calvin. His book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was published in 1536. The book was a sensational success. It suddenly gave this talented young man "rock star" celebrity across Europe. On the heels of this publishing triumph, Calvin received from the Reformer William Farel and the city fathers of Geneva an offer he couldn't refuse. The city had just adopted the Reformation and needed someone with Calvin's skills and prestige to implement this new way of being church. This wasn't exactly the kind of work that Calvin was seeking. He was more interested in an academic career. Nonetheless, the challenge was intriguing and he accepted.

Two years into his new career, Calvin was humbled as quickly as he had been exalted by the popularity of his book. He found that the authority of his preaching, teaching, and newly-minted celebrity were not enough. His program for transforming the church was a dismal failure. Calvin and William Farel were expelled from Geneva. Calvin then traveled to Strasbourg where he met an experienced church reformer named Martin Bucer. Bucer became Calvin's mentor. Bucer was not a celebrity like Calvin. He did not have Calvin's immense intellectual capacity. But over the years he had learned how to implement an effective reform process in Strasbourg. Bucer knew that it was all about empowering the laity. The medieval church was imploding all across Europe because there was no accountability to the laity and very little effort to minister to the needs of ordinary people. Bucer addressed this issue by pioneering the concept of the elder. Elders would be elected by and responsible to the people. They would share with the clergy the responsibility for the ministry of the church.

After three years of learning about the church under Bucer, Calvin returned to Geneva. This time the shared responsibility between clergy and lay leadership was at the heart of his reform and the result was far more successful. Our election of church officers today is a testimony to the wisdom that Bucer imparted to Calvin. But receiving that wisdom required Calvin to see himself differently. Calvin had to learn that ministry is not about him. It is about the grace of God. It is the ministry of God's grace that reforms the people and the structures of the church then and now.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel Jesus is helping his listeners to see themselves differently. He is speaking to people who think they understand who God is and how God is working in the world. Jesus tells a parable about two men who go into the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Jesus' listeners have a definite picture in their minds about who these two people are. The Pharisee represents complete dedication to observing the law of Moses. He is one who exceeds the law's demands. He is someone that church leaders pray will show up on Pledge Commitment Sunday. He gives more than ten percent of his income. He is religious in the best sense of the word.

The tax collector falls into a very different category in the minds of Jesus' listeners. He works for Rome to collect taxes from his people to support an army of occupation. He is exploiting his people. Most of his fellow citizens consider him a traitor. He is a man whose sins are so great that he would not ordinarily be allowed to set foot inside the temple.

Jesus understands perfectly well how this audience perceives these two men. The Pharisee is their role model; the spiritual ideal toward which they direct their lives. The tax collector is the person they least want to be. When Jesus describes the prayers of these two men there is nothing in them that is surprising or distressing to this audience. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not a sinner. The tax collector admits his sin and begs God for mercy. From the perspective of Jesus' listeners, each prayer seems appropriate to the spiritual condition of the one who offers it. They all want to pray the prayer of the Pharisee and hope never to have to pray the prayer of the tax collector.

Then, as Jesus so often does in the parables, he turns the tables on his audience. It is not the Pharisee who leaves the temple justified as everyone expects. It is the tax collector who receives God's blessing. Jesus wants his listeners to understand that the central character of the parable is neither the tax collector nor the Pharisee. The truth is that neither of them measures up to what God intends. The central character is God. Jesus is using this story to shake up his audience. He is shocking them into reassessing how God is at work in the world. He is challenging them to see themselves in a different way. God's grace rearranges our sense of who we are. The ministry of grace reverses our expectations, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 18:14)."

By the year 1800, Presbyterians in Chester County, South Carolina were struggling with a destructive force in their society. Slavery had spread from the plantations along the Atlantic coast to the piedmont area where they lived. This part of South Carolina had originally been populated by Scots-Irish subsistence farmers. The small farmers now realized that their livelihood was threatened by the encroaching slave economy. Some farmers in Chester County responded by leaving the area and migrating to the frontier. Others decided to participate in this new economy by acquiring slaves at their own.

In 1801, the members of the Reformed Presbyterian churches in Chester County were thrown into a crisis. Representatives arrived from the governing body of their church in Pennsylvania informing them that a more specific anti-slavery policy had been adopted. Slave holders would no longer be admitted to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. If they wanted to receive communion they would have to divest themselves of their slaves. But they could not return to the good graces of the church by selling their slaves. They would have to reject the slave economy by setting their slaves free.

We don't know how many people kept their slaves and left the church. But several sources tell us what happened at the Rocky Creek Church where some of my ancestors were members. On a designated Sunday most members brought their slaves to church and set them free. Contemporary sources estimated the market value of these slaves at more than \$1,500 which was a huge sum for that time.

That was a Commitment Sunday in the fullest sense of the term. The meaning of their action is something we can take to heart on our Commitment Sunday. They knew that what they did that day was not about them. It was all about God, whose grace changes everything.