

Humility Part Two: Taking Matters Into Your Own Hands

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There is a certain genre of film and story I remember watching and reading growing up that centers the attention of the narrative on a particular character – the protagonist of the story --whose nature it is to be a generally good and law-abiding person. This is a person who believes in right over wrong, justice for the little guy, good over evil – and as these stories go this protagonist spends the first half or two thirds of the story observing and experiencing and getting angrier and angrier over the evil and injustice around him -- until finally he reaches a boiling point – and he decides to take matters into his own hands. He has had enough and he is going to single-handedly bring about goodness and justice to the world. There was the Incredible Hulk – remember him? Mild-mannered Bill Bixby who always seems to get into some sort of pickle with evil and then all of a sudden muscles start popping and shirts start ripping and eyes start flashing – and boy you better watch out. Batman whose movies we are still watching – mild-mannered Bruce Wayne sits back and watches the Joker, the Riddler, the Cat woman, the Penguin mess around with Gotham City until he can take it no more – and then it's down to the Bat cave with Robin and the Bat mobile and boy you better watch out. Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson, Sylvester Stallone – man, you better not heat these guys up to their boiling point – or there is no telling what mayhem might ensue. And the constant in all the stories is this character who has developed such a view of himself - such a sense of self-righteousness...such a perspective of perceived clarity, that the only thing he thinks he can do is

take matters into their own hands. In fact the whole story is simply a waiting for that moment to happen. When “the man” takes over and saves the day with guns blazing and fists punching.

Now as Matthew tells us his good news about Jesus he is good to spend the first three chapters announcing to us the arrival of the Messiah Jesus – the King of the Jews. Angels announce. Stars align. King Herod panics. And last week John the Baptist announces and prepares. And when the adult Jesus arrives finally on the scene there is no doubt that Messiah has arrived. He submits to John’s baptism. The Spirit alights as a dove. The voice of the Father speaks from the heavens – “this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Jesus even goes further to prove his mettle – he submits to the movement of the Spirit and is driven into the wilderness where he undergoes forty days of fasting. This is The Son of God. If there is anyone who has the spiritual and moral authority to take matters into his own hands – Matthew tells us – it’s Jesus. So just when Jesus reaches this height of moral and spiritual character – who should arrive but the devil. The tempter. The adversary. And so now is the moment we’ve been waiting for. Now’s time when the muscles pop and shirts tear. Now’s the time when capes are donned and weapons drawn. Now’s the time when the boiling point blows the lid off everything. The great cosmic battle between good and evil.

Actually no. Actually now is the time for temptation. For while everyone who is reading and everyone who is watching is expecting the story to go the way the story always goes – expecting for God’s man to take matters into his own hands – jump into the wrestling ring and put the devil into a headlock. That’s the way the story is supposed to go. But in God’s story that is the time of temptation. That is the time when we are most vulnerable.

Three times the tempter tempts Jesus to take matters into his own hands.

- If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.
- If you are the Son of God, command the angels to catch you as you fall from the pinnacle of the temple.
- If you are the Son of God, command yourself a following.

If you are the Son of God take control. Take matters into your own hands. And what Jesus is here to teach us is that when you think you have gotten yourself to some level of moral height, some level of spiritual maturity, some level of unimpeachable character – this is when we are most susceptible to the tempter. This is when we are most vulnerable to getting everything wrong. This is when we begin to rely on ourselves more than on God.

It's how the story of Job begins, right? We all kind of know the story of Job – the man who gets more of his fair share of pain. But the story begins how? It begins in the introduction of Job as a blameless and upright man, who feared God and turned away from evil. He's the man. He's the one we can count on. He's the blameless one. He's the righteous one. And he is the one who gets tempted. Death and destruction and disease wipes away everything he holds dear other than his loving wife. So now's the time, right? Now's the time to take matters into your own hands. Now's the time to go it alone. Now's the time, says his bride, now's the time to curse God and die. Show him that it's not his life anymore, it's yours and you will flex your muscles and do as you please.

And Job says with no muscles bulging, no capes a-furling, no weapons blasting – Job asks his simple question, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In other words, where to be as God would have us be, we live as God would have us live and trust God for the rest. We live as God would have us live and trust God for the rest. We leave the matter in God's hands.

But it is so tempting not to, right? It's so tempting not to trust God for the rest. To take matters into our hands. Take over for the good Lord because doing the right thing doesn't seem to be enough. Or to insist that God owes us something. We've done our part and somehow we are owed something. More providence. More protection. More reward. More notice. More recognition. Hello Lord, what about moi?

Some of you have heard of J. Hudson Taylor. J. Hudson Taylor was a missionary in China during the nineteenth century. He founded the China Inland Mission – which became the center of

Protestant missions in China. After forty-five years in China, Hudson Taylor returned home to England, his native country. And when he landed there in Southampton, he was on the same ship as Teddy Roosevelt. And when the ship docked, there was a band waiting for Teddy Roosevelt. And they played the music and the crowd was there for Teddy Roosevelt. And there was confetti and streamers and applause and Teddy Roosevelt was carried off the ship on the shoulders of his admirers. There was a parade in town for Teddy Roosevelt.

Hudson Taylor just stood there alone waiting. The church committee that was supposed to meet him never came. Half hour. Hour. Two hours. After two hours he put down his suitcase on the dock and sat down alone.

"I didn't expect a band or a cheering mob," he thought, "but there should have been somebody here to welcome me home."

But then Hudson Taylor writes in his diary, "But then God spoke to me, 'Hudson,' he said, 'you're not home yet.'"

It is one of the crazy things about this life, this human life, this human spiritual journey of ours – that as soon as we think we have arrived, as soon as we think we've done what needs to be done, as soon as we think we have some firm grasp of things – that's when the tempter comes. And the only thing that we have to throw at the tempter – is not our brains, not our moral superiority, not our wittiness and cunning, not our resume – because those are the very things that the devil in fact uses against us. No, the only thing we can throw at the tempter is humility. An awareness of who we are and whose we are. A deep and abiding sense that we don't have what it takes. Only God has what it takes. And I can only do what God would have me do. And I look to the Son of God in the wilderness. The pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Come down, they said to Jesus up there on that cross, if you are the Son of God come down!

Take matters into your own hands. Make it about you and not about the Father. Show us a little Incredible Hulk.

But from beginning to end Jesus is here as Son of God to teach us about being sons and daughters of God. And sons and daughters of God are very susceptible. We are enormously susceptible to temptation. We are at great risk, the more we think we know God and have been strengthened by some sense of spiritual certitude, we are at great risk to miss the whole point. Sons and daughters of God by their very nature – are happy to leave the certainty to God and the trust to themselves. Certainty to God, trust to themselves. Live as God would have us live and trust God for the rest. Or as Clint Eastwood would say, “A man’s got to know his limitations.”

Any pastor will tell you, we who stand before flocks of folks entrusted to be some sort of authority on the word of God – how tempting it is to forget your limitations.

You remember the story about the Mississippi riverboat captain who was approached during the Civil War by a cotton trader who asked him if he would run his cotton up the river. It was illegal to trade cotton then between the north and the south – so the riverboat captain refused. The cotton trader said, “I’ll give you \$500 if you run this cotton up the river.” The captain said no. “I’ll give you a \$1000.” “No,” said the captain. “I’ll give you \$2000.” No. I’ll give you \$3000. And with that the captain reached for his gun and put it into the man’s face and said, “Get off my boat; you’re coming too near my price.”

We all have our price, don’t we? We all have our limitations. We all have our threshold that may compel us to take matters into our own hands. So can you hear what the Son of God is saying to the Adversary? Can you hear him speak the word of scripture? Not as weapons. Not as righteous superiority. Not as I know more than you know. He’s quoting so that he can hear. He’s uttering the word of God to remember he is a Son of God. He is not trying to play God, he’s trying to obey God. Can you hear it?

- If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread. ***“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.’”***
- If you are the Son of God, command the angels to catch you as you fall from the pinnacle of the temple. ***“It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”***
- If you are the Son of God, command yourself a following. ***“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”***

It’s not whether I have what it takes, it’s whether God has what it takes. Only humility can say that.

The greatest leaders of history were women and men who had a sober view of themselves...and an exalted view of God.

At one point during the Civil War Abraham Lincoln issued an authorization to the War Department for a certain transfer of regiments at the front. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton refused to carry out the order from his Commander-in-Chief saying that Lincoln was a fool for issuing the order. When a congressman brought back word that Stanton had called Lincoln a fool, Lincoln replied, “Did Stanton say I was a fool?” “Yes sir,” the congressman replied. “He called you a fool several times.” Lincoln responded, “Well if Stanton said I was a fool, then I must be one, because he is nearly always right.”

A man’s got to know his limitations. We don’t play God, we obey God.

It was all that good Baptist preaching that led Martin Luther King Jr. to employ non-violence in his tool for change...and to trust God for the rest. Said King, “Non-violence is a powerful and just weapon - which cuts without wounding...and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.” We don’t play God...we obey God.

It is, I imagine what the good apostle had in mind. The apostle Paul sitting in Roman house arrest – some friends having let him down, others far away – and the future quite up in the air.

Caesar waving above his head the imperial sword. A good place for the tempter to show up. Curse God and die. Get bitter. Plan an escape. Give up. Take matters into your own hands. No. No. No. "I have learned," he writes, "to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

As we sang in our first hymn, those great words from Martin Luther:

Did we in our own strength confide,

Our striving would be losing;

Were not the right Man on our side,

The Man of God's own choosing.

Dost ask who that may be?

Christ Jesus, it is He...

It is enough, isn't it? To have Christ with us. To let Christ live in us. To let Christ love through us. To obey God and not to play God.