

Walking Virtuously in the Dignity of the Beloved

By Bobby Schuller

I just want to begin by saying something that you already know, I hope - that you are loved, you are admired, you are appreciated, you are respected, and I'm thankful for you.

How does it feel when you hear words like that? It feels good, doesn't it? It touches something inside of you. It touches a felt need. The need to feel valued, respected, appreciated, honored. This is, from a personal standpoint, the greatest human need. Many of us can think about times in which we were really embarrassed or times in which we were honored and these are either some of the worst or greatest moments in our lives.

I'll never forget, when I was in high school, I had this big crush on this girl named Hannah Presley. Yes, she is related to Elvis. She barely knew me from Adam. Of course I knew everything about her that could be known. It was a little creepy, but you know. High school students are awkward. And I know she didn't know me from Adam. I would have done anything for a picture of Hannah Presley or to have a date with Hannah Presley. I just never had the guts to ask her. And I remember her family did this Bible study for teens at her house. There were maybe 50 kids there, and I didn't care about the Bible or about any of these students; I cared about Hannah. And I wanted to just meet her and talk to her.

And I remember that she had an empty seat next to her, and I didn't think she knew who I was. At the time, some of you may remember that I went by Robbie. And as I came into her house, she was on the opposite side of the living room, an empty chair next to her, and she says, "Robbie! Robbie!" And it was like I stopped breathing. I froze in my tracks. Fear and joy bubbling up inside of me all at the same time. She said "Robbie!" And I was like yeah? She said, "I have a seat next to me. Come sit with me." This was not a dream, this was real, and I said, "What?"

"I have a seat next to me. Come sit next to me." I was like okay, and then all of a sudden, this guy goes (BOOM) and my shoulder gets bumped and he starts kind of briskly walking towards Hannah. It was Hannah's cousin Robbie. True story. And immediately - she still didn't know who I was, I think - I was worried, thinking, "I hope nobody saw that." If somebody had seen that, I might have just withered and died on the floor right there.

Many of us have our funny stories of times in which we were embarrassed. But sometimes when we're embarrassed, especially when somebody intentionally embarrasses or humiliates us, those are some of the hardest, even most evil things we've experienced in our lives. That's why bullying is evil. Bullying is not about violence, it's about shame. So even when a bully hits or does something to a kid, really behind it is this thing of saying you don't have any value and you get to be abused, and

you get to be humiliated, and we get to mock you in front of others because you don't fit in or we don't like you in some way. And regardless of whether it's bullying or not, many of us have experienced times in our lives when we were humiliated or embarrassed publicly. Few things in the world grieve God's heart more than when you were mocked, bullied, and slandered. God hates it when people do that to you because he loves you because you are admired, respected, valued, and appreciated.

Now many of us we think of the opposite. So we think about how heavy and hard it was on our hearts, how dehumanizing it was when we were embarrassed, but we can also think about times in which we were publicly honored or valued or someone we respected a lot respected us or admired us or appreciated us. And we remember how humanizing that was. How uplifting and great that felt to be valued.

I also will tell you a story. The joy of being a pastor is that people really do appreciate you, and people really do hate you. You get a little bit of both, especially when you're public. Anyway, there was a time years ago, I wasn't working with the *Hour of Power* or the Cathedral, I had my own church, but the *Hour of Power* in Holland invited me to come out and give ten sermons in a village called Hilversum in the Netherlands and it was to be televised over ten weeks. And this was one of the greatest challenges of my life. I gave ten unique sermons in a row: five on Saturday, five on Sunday. And if you're a pastor, preaching is so fun but

every sermon, you give it your all, and you carry the weight of teaching. And so when you do it ten times in a row, it's taxing on the soul.

When I was done with the tenth sermon, I was finished, and I was just so relieved that I'd done this, Jan invited me up in front of all of these people in the church. It was probably harder work to sit through ten sermons than to preach ten sermons. But they did. They sat through ten sermons. And I came up and they sang my grandpa's favorite Dutch hymn that his mother used to play to him when he was a child, "Psalm 42." It's a Dutch version of the song. And I stood there and they all stood and they reached their hands out towards me as a way of blessing. And they were mostly older than me, too, so it felt almost like spiritual parents putting a blessing over my life. I actually felt, in a spiritual way, something break and something good come upon my shoulders. Like the Dutch gave me something in that moment. I think I'll know it when I die.

But as I stood there, they sang the song. You may know it if you're Dutch or you have Dutch heritage. (BOBBY HUMS A SONG) You know that song? No. (BOBBY HUMS A SONG) And they were singing it in Dutch, that's why I'm not. My Dutch ain't so good. And they were singing this over me. I don't cry often, I wish I cried more, but in that moment I just cried, not sad tears, just tears of joy and I just felt overwhelmed by love and compassion and admiration and respect. I felt valued. I felt like what I did mattered. I felt blessed.

Maybe you remember a time in which you were brought before friends or in front of a church or in front of your colleagues. Maybe at work or maybe it's just something simple. Your parents or a pastor or a dear friend did that to you, they blessed you, they put a hand on your shoulder and they just said I love you. Man, I appreciate you. Few people see the hard work you do, and you just felt something.

The reason being honored, respected, valued, admired feels so gratifying, so humanizing, so lifting, and the reason why public humiliation, a public mockery, contempt feels so dehumanizing and evil is because within all of us is the greatest human need and the greatest human personal need is dignity. The greatest personal human need is dignity. And let me tell you, you deserve dignity. It doesn't matter what you've done in your past, it doesn't matter your mistakes, it doesn't matter all your flaws. Congratulations. Being a human being means you're not perfect. In spite of all of the things that you don't like about yourself, all the things you maybe even hate about yourself, God doesn't hate you. God very much likes you, he's not disappointed in you, and he values you.

You are admired, respected, loved, and appreciated. You deserve to hear that you are loved and valued in the kingdom of God. And someday, you may not feel it today, but someday, especially when you come to stand before that throne, you will see that God will say well done good and faithful servant. You put me first in your life. You cared for others.

You worked in the hidden parts of the world. Nobody saw you in your good works or they thanked you, but I am thankful to you for the hard work that you've done. I see how you've cared for the sick family members. I've seen how you've endured your own sickness. I've seen how you've been generous. I see how you've worked in your churches or schools or non profits and I see how you've endured and not given up in the midst of trial, and I'm just so proud of you. You're admired. You're appreciated. You are loyal. You are good. You are loved.

Dignity is the greatest human need. In fact, I think most of the battles that religious people and political people have, the reason they're not getting anywhere is because they're not treating each other with dignity. It used to be that in European or western culture, we actually inherited this from Middle Eastern culture. We used to treat even our enemies with dignity and respect. What happened? We don't do that anymore. Someone disagrees with us we're so insecure and sensitive that we call them evil. Nobody says I'm right and you're wrong anymore. Everybody says I'm right and you're evil. Can we stop that? Whether you're on the right or the left, whether you're religious or non-religious, can we all agree that when we disagree about anything that probably the first thing we ought to do is treat those with whom we disagree with dignity and respect. Everyone deserves dignity. Everyone. And let me tell you, you deserve dignity and you're valued.

I want to first, if you hear anything I say, though, true dignity cannot be found first in man's approval. And although when other people treat us with scorn and shame and mock us, we must first, as believers, find our dignity in God's love that says you're not what you do, you're not what you have, you're not what people say about you. You're the beloved sons and daughters of God. If my life and heartbeat is not first rooted in God's love and God's value of me, I'm not going to have any respect for myself, and I'm not going to maintain my boundaries, I'm not going to know how to say no. I'm going to be reactionary. I'm going to be stressed out. First, we must find our identity located in God's power.

I think there's this cycle that I see all the time as a pastor as I work in the lives of different people and families. And there are two cycles. One is a cycle of woundedness, and one is a cycle of healing.

In the first cycle, at some point in your life, you were wounded. Maybe you were abused. Maybe your parents didn't treat you with respect or they put you down, or maybe there was a family member or friend or bully or a teacher or a pastor in your life that harmed you. Somebody you trusted. You let them in and they hurt you bad. And even today it still stings when you think about it. You try and shove it down.

When we are wounded relationally in life that affects our behavior and so we have this wound and it creates in us an insecurity. Because we feel insecure, we very slow to let people in, and even when we do let people in, we become reactionary, defensive, hurried, stressed out, and

very often our response to feeling insecure relationally is pretense. We pretend. We wear a mask. We do our best to dress a certain way, to talk a certain way, to fit a certain thing, and we hide many of the vulnerable aspects of our lives by putting up this mask. And everyone does that. Everyone does that. But when we do that too much, we do it to the point that we harm others. We lie to protect our mask. We steal to protect our mask. And we become the very bullies that bullied us to protect our mask. We put people down because we think it will lift us up. Maybe we don't actually say it but we laugh when somebody else mocks someone. Or we don't say anything when somebody else mocks or gossips about someone. Why? Because, well, we're in and they're out and that makes me better and that helps me protect my mask.

And so the more we value our pretense or our fake mask or a fake ego, the more we're willing to hurt and harm others. And some of us have gone so far down that road that we harm others and they therefore enter into that cycle. They feel wounded. And because of that wound, they feel insecure. Because of that insecurity, they build up presence and a mask. And because of that pretense, they wound others and the cycle continues forever.

Wounded people wound people. Hurt people hurt people. When you're harmed, and you don't travel into that harm and with God's love, you become the kind of person who's reactionary and you just don't even realize that you're hurting people. You won't lift yourself up by bringing

people down. You won't lift yourself up by bringing people down. If you want to lift yourself up, encourage others and help others. And that's what you do. You're the other kind of person. You're the person who's been healed.

That is the power of the cross and the resurrection that it offers healing and forgiveness for our shame, and for our wounds. And so God comes in and we say Lord I feel really insecure. I have all of these bad memories from either my childhood or from work and I'm just a mess right now. And God comes in and he heals us, and he healed you, and because he healed you, you are now secure. And because now you have some sense of security in your life, you are humble and honest with the people that you're close to in your life. You're honest with your spouse, you're honest with your kids and your parents, you're honest with some of your colleagues who you're close to.

And yes, some of them will betray you or hurt you or violate you or violate boundaries, but even still, you're not rooted in their approval, you're rooted in God's approval for you. You know that God appreciates you and loves you and that in turn allows you to be a healing person. You're allowed to take risks, you're allowed to encourage others without feeling like you're going to miss out on approval of others. You're able to help others succeed in their job or in life or in society, and that's great.

You are healed, you are appreciated, you are rooted in God's love, and that has become what used to be an abyss; your wound. What used

to be your greatest weakness, that inner void has now been filled with God's spirit and now it's the source of your greatest power. Your greatest wound has become the source of your greatest power because it's been healed and it's made you a wounded healer. Can I get an amen? Said yes, that's right. And so God is lifting you up and will continue to lift you up.

In the passage I have for today is Matthew chapter 23. In this passage, Jesus is very angry at religious leaders for their ostentation, their pretence, their egos. They want to be respected and glorified by man. They don't care about what God thinks. The reason they do everything is to get applause and appreciation, and that forms in them this type of person I'm saying that they put others down to lift themselves up. And he curses them for it.

Religion is meant to be and theology is meant to lift people up. And good theology has in the past. Dennis Prager was interviewing one of the world's greatest composers, a European, and he asked him, "Will Europe's secular art ever equal its religious art from the age in which Europe was religious?" And the composer said, "Absolutely not. Never. Never again will Europe be able to create the art it created when it was a religious continent." There will not be the same type of Bach's and Beethoven, Michelangelo, Donatello, Raphael, and all the other various ninja turtles. As soon as I said Raphael it was over.

No, but I mean you seriously think about a religious Europe, warts and all, definitely had problems. The religious community definitively had issues. The purpose, though, of theology religion in Europe was to lift people up! Without faith, our culture doesn't have a philosophy of lifting people up to something. It's all about going inward or going down. No more going up. And that's something that really concerns me because it's catching on here in America and we need to make sure that we continue to recognize that God wants to lift us to the heavens. And that's what we do here. That's why we engage in the arts here. Anyway, I'm digressing.

The point is that theology is meant to help others, not haunt others. The point of good religion is to give people wings, not give people weight. The purpose of good religion is meant to give people purpose and to lift people up. Does your theology carry you or do you have to carry it? It's a good question. And when Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, he says see these Pharisees here? He says do what they say to do because what they're saying is right. You might know some pastors like this. Do what they say because what they say is right, but don't do what they do. They are not living according to the torah and what God has instructed them to do.

They have these phylacteries. You know phylactery is like this little box you put on your head or your hand and Jews would use it to pray. They still do today. He said they make those phylacteries extra big so

people can see how religious they are. And they make their tassels, which are representative of the law, super long so everybody can see how into the law they are.

And he says whenever they're sitting, when they go to synagogue, they always go to the front of the synagogue and they sit in the seats of honor in front so everybody can see them, and because they're pious enough, they're put in front of everyone to be a model. Don't be like them. And he says don't let anybody call you rabbi. And don't let anybody call you father. He says they like to be called father. They like to be called rabbi. They like to be called teacher. They like to be honored and respected and admired. And the heart of this is that they find their dignity in the approval of man and it's poisoned their religion. They find their dignity in what other people say, they find their dignity in what they have, they find their dignity in their good deeds. And I think the purpose of this is that they don't be like them. Find your dignity in me.

And Jesus gives them the key to dignity or to being exalted or to glory, as the scripture says. And that's humility. He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. See all of us need dignity, but if we try and get it from man, we're not going to be able to humble ourselves. If we get it from God, we already have it and that allows us to humble ourselves and serve others. And those are the greatest people on earth. And that's who you are.

Humble people like you, because you're rooted in the dignity and love of God. You don't need the approval of men. You know you can be rooted in God's love, and you do that every day. You humble yourself, you root yourself, and because of that, God's going to exalt you.

And so I'll close with this. I remember when Dallas Willard, my personal hero before he died, came and preached at our small church, the Tree of Life. And he said this one line and I've never forgotten it: "Don't pretend, don't presume, and don't push."

So first, don't pretend. You don't have to pretend and you don't pretend. And that's great.

I know you're thinking when I was talking about dating Hannah, "How did he end up with Hannah? She's beautiful and he's like a six point five, to be honest." Six point eight? Yes, when I started to get to know Hannah, I was wearing a mask. I was pretending. In fact, one of the first conversations I had with Hannah, we were sitting at a kitchen table, and she said, "How much can you bench press?" And I didn't know. I was playing basketball but we didn't really use the gym much and I didn't know. And so I said, "I can bench my weight." It was a total lie. All I knew was benching your weight was a good thing. And she was like, "Mmmm, cool." I was thinking that was not the right answer. Believe it or not, I enrolled that semester in a weightlifting class. And it was months later that I told her how much I could bench, and she said, "Oh,

that's interesting." I found out later, by the way, she was just trying to break the silence.

And I would start doing these things to try and impress her. Really a mask. I would try to talk about my accolades, I would try to be all cool, and she just wasn't into it. This is a period of about five years where she just had no interest in me.

Actually, at the time, Hannah had all these guys that had crushes on her. It seemed like everybody I knew. And I thought I'm just going to be Hannah's friend. She has all these guys, but she doesn't have any guys that are just her friend. And so I decided to be myself and that's when she started liking me! When I just started acting like me without trying to pretend or impress her. And the funny thing about that is I'm so glad that Hannah fell in love with the real me and not the fake me. So glad that she didn't fall in love with this fake thing I created for her. She just liked me for who I was.

See, that's the danger. When we pretend, people fall in love with our fake self. How do you escape something like that? You don't have to pretend. By the way, pretending makes you awkward, not awesome, and that's what I learned from that experience. I also learned that people feel closer to you, the people that you love and the people that love you actually feel closer to you when you're more vulnerable. Men, I'm speaking to you. When you are more vulnerable about your emotions, about feeling stressed, about feeling angry, about feeling sad, about

feeling lost, people feel closer to you, not farther. You connect in the heart instead of just the head. And you don't pretend because you're rooted in God's love and your dignity is found in him and so you stopped pretending a long time ago. And you're thankful to God that you don't have to pretend because you've experienced real love.

And so you live every day in the dignity of the beloved because you don't pretend. And you live every day in the dignity of the beloved because you don't presume. You don't presume. Assumptions are so unfair. We've all been there where somebody assumes something about us and it wasn't there at all. And it feels so unfair. If you're going to assume something about somebody, assume the best. This is the Hannah rule of life. Hannah 3:16. This is what it sounds like today. I feel like it's all about Hannah. I love Hannah. If you're going to assume something about somebody, assume the best. This will really serve you well in life. And you do. That's what's so great about you. When you think about others, you see the best in them. And they feel that, and good on you for that.

I remember in church early on there was this girl who was really insecure. Everybody loved her. I mean she was one of the most adored people but she always got paranoid. I think she had a developmental issue and she used to say things like, "They're gossiping about me, and they're talking about me, and they think I'm this, and they think I'm that." We would just go to her and say nobody is saying this about you.

But the funny thing is, the more she talked that way, the more she didn't realize she was pushing people further away.

When you presume the worst about people, you push them away. When you presume the best about people, you draw them closer to you. So don't presume. And if you're going to assume something about somebody, assume the best! And you do. You assume the best in others. See the best in others and they'll give you their best. Amen? I'd rather see the best in someone and be wrong than see the worst in someone and be right. Wouldn't you?

So don't presume. Just love people, and you do. You love people, you encourage them. You have a lens and an ability to see the best. When you say it to them and when you do it, it just gives them so much joy because you're meeting that great human need; the need for dignity, appreciation, respect and value. Amen?

And finally, you don't push. You don't have to push. You stand up for what's right, you stand up for what you believe. You can have a good intellectual debate with others, but you don't push. You let God do the pushing. You let God do the pushing. God's a much better pusher than you, amen? God, by his holy spirit, is much better at convincing people to change their hearts. You just be you, believe what you believe, don't lie, don't pretend, don't be fake, but don't push. Let God do the pushing. You can let it go. Pray. He'll hear your prayers, and just let it go to him

and watch by faith as he brings about the best things in your life and in the lives of the people you care about.

God is proud of you. I know you've made mistakes, you've messed up, you beat yourself up, but God is proud of you. He appreciates you. He values you. He loves you. You are respected, you are admired, you are valued, and you are treasured. No one can take that from you. You are loved, and you can let go of whatever the bullies said, whatever those hurtful words that were said to you when you were a kid, or that were said to you at work last week, or any of the disrespect that you received this week, the shame, the humiliation of this or that or whatever, even when it was sin, you can let it go. That's the glory of the gospel. You're respected, admired, valued, treasured, and you matter to me, and to this church, and to God, in Jesus' name.

Let's pray: Father, Lord, thank you that you've called us. We repent of our sin, we ask that you transform us and give us eternal life. Only in the name of Jesus can we be saved, and we trust in him. Amen.