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GOD'S LION OR HIS HUMBLE SERVANT? PREACHING AND HUMILITY "SERVING THE LORD WITH ALL HUMILITY" (ACTS 20:19)¹

by J. Mark Beach

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

It's an honor to be asked to speak at this United Reformed Pastors' Conference, and especially to be asked to speak on the pastor applying his homiletic skill in order to serve the Lord with all humility.

The difficulty of this task is that I feel the need to exhibit some humility in talking about it. From the start, I feel like I'm supposed to say something like: "Ah shucks, what do I know about humility and preaching?"

Truth be told, I have much to learn about humility. I know *that* because of my own battle with pride. I don't think I'll be far off the mark in saying that many a minister here likewise wages a battle with pride in his preaching—that serving the Lord with all humility in the pulpit is an uphill trek.

The title of this talk is *God's Lion or His Humble Servant? Preaching and Humility*. First let me say that I commend to you no better discussion of this idea than the last chapter of John R.W. Stott's great book on preaching *Between Two Worlds*; the chapter is entitled "Courage and Humility."² Whatever I have to say this afternoon does not supersede or trump his insightful commentary; and I urge you not to neglect his comments both on courage and humility in the proclamation of the gospel. I simply add my remarks to his fine analysis.

I want to divide my comments into three parts. First, I will offer a word of definition about humility, along with a biblical illustration of humility and

1. A version of this speech was first presented at the United Reformed Pastors' Conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan held at Puritan Reformed Seminary, May 14, 2011.

2. John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 299-335.

lion-heartedness in action: God's humble lion—*the that*. Second, I will explore with you why you should be humble in approaching and performing the work of preaching: God's humble lion—*the ought*. Last, I'll offer some comments about remedies to the malady of pride that plagues our pulpit work and undermines our effectiveness in serving the Lord with all humility: God's humble lion—*the now what?*

I. God's Humble Lion: *the That*

Those of you who know me well know that acting the role of a lion comes more naturally to me than that of a humble lamb. The title of this address is a question: God's Lion (make it a *roaring* lion, if you like) or Humble Servant? (Question mark "?") Which is it?

Actually that's a false start. Consider with me, just briefly, the right definition of humility. The medieval tradition is particularly rich in treating such questions. The four cardinal virtues, as you know, are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. And an important feature of temperance is humility, for humility is temperance put into action with respect to one's estimation of him or herself, according to the truth.³

It is vital that we understand that biblical humility is not mere self-accusation, self-disparagement, or wallowing in cringing feelings of inferiority. Because of our sins, of course, these things come into play. But humility is a virtue apart from sin. Jesus was humble and sinless. In fact it is very important that we understand that humility and high-mindedness join hands and walk together.

High-mindedness here means that we are to aspire to the glory of God and the coming of his kingdom. High-mindedness means that we feel the desire and potential for great things, blessed things, magnanimous things. We have eternity placed in our hearts (Eccl. 2:11). High-mindedness is why we long for a new heaven and a new earth. High-mindedness is why we pray, as Jesus taught us: "Hallowed be thy name; Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done." Humility, you see, is not opposed to high-mindedness. Indeed, any humility that does not join hands with high-mindedness is not true humility.⁴ There is nothing honorable and commendable for aiming low, seeking to achieve little, and desiring not much.

Sadly, we often identify high-mindedness with haughtiness—and that's because a worldly sort of high-mindedness can be coupled with pride; and pride tops the list of the seven deadly sins. Pride is the sin that covers the devil's tracks in our lives because it blinds us to our need for divine mercy. Pride camouflages one's shortcomings with an overblown portrait of one's strengths. More, pride is the sin that wants power over others, superiority. It can be pathetic or titanic. It is pathetic in the form of inordinate self-congratulation; such persons always look a bit wobbly. Pride is titanic when it dares to believe that God is irrelevant. Whereas all other sins flee before God, pride stands against God. Pride can be personal, occupational, racial, intellectual, national, or even federational. Pride consists in self-centeredness, especially giving way to excessive self-esteem. And remember

3. Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1966), 189.

4. Pieper, 190.

this: the Bible tells us that God opposes the proud (cf. James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). High-mindedness united with pride becomes high-handedness and conceit.

Pride is a posture toward God, toward yourself, and toward others—a posture of *self-exaltation*! In his Gospel, Luke tells us that Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican because some “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” The parable ends with these words: “I tell you that this man [the Publican], rather than the other [the Pharisee], went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisee in the parable isn't biblically high-minded, nor is he humble—not toward God, not toward self, not toward others.

However, a caution is needed here. Following Kierkegaard,⁵ we must guard ourselves in becoming pharisaical toward the Pharisee—which brings us back to preaching—to my preaching and to your preaching. Are we laboring at this task in all humility? How tragic if we were to pray: “God, I thank you that I'm not like other preachers: ear-pleasers, shallow story-tellers, sappy, sentimental weepers, or even like this verse-by-verse fundamentalist! I give at least twenty hours a week to each sermon; I devote myself to intensive Sunday morning preparation; and I know how to exegete from the biblical tongues.”

Self-exaltation!

Another version of such a prayer might be: “God, I thank you that I'm not like other preachers: Rev. Runaway, who's too scared to call a spade a spade; Pastor Wearisome, who can't recognize anything imaginative even if it sat in his lap; and Parson Tiresome, who says the same thing the same way in every sermon he preaches. I'm your roaring lion, Lord. I don't only step on toes, I take hammers to them. I'm creative, imaginative, orthodox, and interesting. Even when my preaching shows some dust, it's *gold dust*!

Self-exaltation!

Against this self-assessment, let us consider an alternative. Indeed, John Stott is right: preaching can be (and ought to be) courageous and humble; high-minded and modest; lion-like and lamb-like—simultaneously!

We see humility in the ministry of Jesus and of John, which serves to illustrate being a humble lion.

Consider Jesus' ministry as recorded for us in Matthew 11. It begins by Jesus easing John the Baptist's doubts regarding whether Jesus is the Christ. From there he transitions to a sermon about John, speaking to the crowds. John the Baptist was no Rev. Runaway; he wasn't a Pastor Tiresome or a Parson Wearisome. People didn't go out into the desert wilderness to see “a reed shaken by the wind” or to watch the cane-grass grow on the banks of the Jordan. It wasn't to glimpse a nice piece of scenery—a reed swaying in the breeze at sunset. That is not why they went to John. Nor was to it behold “A man wearing soft robes” or silk suits. No! No! They went to see a prophet of God, and more than a prophet; they journeyed to hear the one who, unbeknownst to them, was the forerunner to the Christ. They went to hear God's lion roar; they went to hear him roar and call them to repentance, but they also heard him say, “I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals” (Mark 1:7). John was God's lion and humble servant.

5. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, Kierkegaard's Writings, XVIII, ed. and trans., with introduction and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 127.

From here in chapter 11 Matthew shows us the Jesus who could simultaneously, in the same preaching event, speak words of woe to hard-hearted communities and words of solace to weak-souled individuals. To the cities—and to their citizens—who witnessed his miracles but remained unrepentant, Jesus declared: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you” (vss. 21-24—NRSV). And four verses later we read that at that time Jesus bid the weary and burdened to come to him: “Come to me, all you that are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (vss. 28-30—NIV).

Was John, was Jesus God’s lion? Yes! Were they God’s humble servants? Indeed!

II. God’s Humble Lion: *the Ought*

Now, the next thing we need to ponder is why you should be, and must become, God’s humble lion. There is an “oughtness” to being a humble lion of God.

The Nature of Preaching

First, preachers ought to be humble in the work of preaching because of the nature of the pastorate and especially the labor of preaching.

Whoever endeavors to preach the Word discovers that a kind of exile awaits him. Immediately, repeatedly, and inevitably he finds himself banished to an odd and uncomfortable *isolation*—sometimes worse: *loneliness*. Your work as a minister of the gospel is carried out in remoteness—away from public view, not only remote from the world but even from your parishioners. At times, it might feel like the Grand Canyon separates you from them. Certainly by worldly standards the figure of the pastor cuts a pathetic image. He, halo in hand, saunters off to his study to probe into an old book, a stranger to “real life”—though he is a kind of public person—while he is surrounded by a circle of followers who share his religious concerns. Such is the world’s portrait.

Smaller still is the company of those who lend the pastor a hand in this project of preaching, both in explication and application. He must do this work alone—with his books, with voices from the present and the past (if he is wise), but he must do this mostly alone. And to do it well, he must not let other voices drown out his own—that is, he must bring his own work to the pulpit if he is to be genuine and not a pretender.

Preaching is a humbling task for that reason alone; and you, therefore, if you’re a preacher, ought to be *humbled* by that. Every week you are called to endure this isolation. Couple that with conflict in the consistory room, spats among members, wayward souls and wandering sheep who do not want to be

brought back, and untimely deaths—sometimes very sorrowful to you—and solitude and isolation become *loneliness*.

No question, usually this isolation is cheerfully embraced, but not always. But here we see that preaching is not allowed to rise higher than its source. The Word of God stands isolated as *the Word of God*. It is not just words among words, but God's Word; it stands alone as such! No servant is greater than his Master—Jesus stood isolated in his suffering. Indeed, there is only one who is Savior, only one who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. More, you're also a servant of the Bride of Christ, and she is isolated from the world, too. The church is alone God's people in this vast globe of humanity. Thus your labor of preparing sermons, of proclaiming the gospel, must participate in the church's solitude and isolation from the world *as the people of God*. This, obviously, has to do with the antithesis, with our pilgrimage, with our living, this side of the new heaven and the new earth, *in* the world but not *of* the world, with our calling to be light and salt, with self-denial and cross-bearing.⁶

Our solitude—or if that word is too pleasant, *our isolation*—can make us, as pastors, long for community and fellowship in the *wrong places*, especially when the church disappoints us and we experience from time-to-time the disunion of the saints. Then we begin to yearn for the flesh pots of Egypt (cf. Exod. 16:3); we are deceived into believing that those worldly pots of meat will meet our needs and fulfill our longings. This takes many forms, of course. Some preachers turn to psychology to drive their preaching and their ministry. I'm not taking a shot at psychology as such; I'm just saying that that's not the pastor's calling and that isn't what it means to preach the Word. Others will turn to quick fix programs to grow a church or try to re-make themselves into their favorite pulpit hero—John Piperites, Tim Kellerites, Alistair Begettes, you fill in the blank.

Still others simply fall into boredom with the Word of God. The deadly sin of sloth takes root, a spiritual jadedness and dullness and joylessness sets the pace; and then the preacher is ever fishing, no, not for men, but for something to relieve his boredom—maybe golf, or skiing, or woodworking, or shopping, or video gaming, or blogging, or worse, a little flirting, a little affair, a little porn-viewing. And now an unbiblical isolation and loneliness sets in.

Preaching must be *humble* because your solitude as a pastor and a preacher shows you every day why you need the communion of the saints, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Doubts about the Gospel

Secondly, preachers ought to be humble because of their own doubts about the gospel, because of their own unbelief. Indeed, homiletics, particularly your own preaching, is endangered by your doubts and questionings. This shows itself in too much fear, too much polemicizing, too much hobby-horsing, maybe a lot of anger or cynicism or frustration. You preach the Word in the rough-and-tumble of real life, of faulty church members, of your own inconsistencies and sins.

What happens is that you exercise this principal means of grace and become frustrated by a seeming lack of progress—young people who sit with

6. Cf. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 113ff.

folded arms, almost daring you to make them interested in the gospel; middle-aged married couples that seem to regress in their understanding of the truth, as they ruthlessly contend with each other—to them divorce looks like an oasis of happiness; older members that are insensitive to the youth and a changing culture, for whom the old, old, story is not Jesus and his love but how we did things in the 1950s. More broadly—more remotely—too is the believing community’s fractured witness, its feebleness, disunity, even its perverse skewing of the truth. On the one hand we live in an age of image, of superficiality, inactivity, disorder, doctrinal ineptitude, doctrinal disinterest, boredom! On the other hand we live in a small Reformed ecclesiastical world wherein small-fry theologians are turned into giants, and the Corinthian propensity to divide into a party-spirit threatens to trip us afresh. Divide and conquer is an ancient tactic!

Then, too, we must admit that occasionally we reach the conclusion that the church itself is hopelessly irrelevant—no, not to our lives—but to the world around us. The fool of Psalm 53 doesn’t so much deny God’s existence as he denies God’s relevance. We start to wonder whether God cares, whether he is using my ministry to work and speak, to plant and to build. Or your doubt might take the form of embarrassment with the gospel. You’re the preacher; but you’re no more likely to testify of the hope that is in you than your most unschooled member; perhaps less likely because you’re schooled. You know the nature of the opponent outside the church walls. But all such doubts are of ancient pedigree for sinners: “Did God say ...?” (Gen.3:1).

Finally, let’s admit it as preachers, we doubt because the world impresses itself upon us—and we are impressed while the church impresses us so little.⁷

But basically, in back of this, rests the “structural flaw” as found in your own “private life” which then either reveals itself in your public life or is carefully camouflaged. Of course, we know that no Christian can entirely rid him or herself of this flaw. Naturally, one temptation is to allow ourselves to become split personalities. We simply pretend to be godly in public, but inwardly, in private, we live a life not shaped by the gospel. We are secular and trivial, not bound by God’s Word. The Holy Spirit is grieved by our duplicity. God’s Spirit testifying with our spirit that we are His children is muffled (cf. Rom. 8:16). Small wonder such a man is a doubter—he well should be! He is a preacher hopping on one foot. He only half believes; he only half confesses Christ; and so he must be content with staggering along, though in his hopping along, he makes some progress. Jesus once described this sort of church and ministry as being neither hot nor cold, but as lukewarm; good only for spewing (Rev. 3:16).⁸

In light of your wobbly faith, your doubt, how can you afford not to be *humble* before God when you stand before your hearers? You are as flawed as they are. You doubt under the assault of the principalities and powers which have simultaneously put bit and bridle on this age, seriously contending against the Word of God and your pulpit opinions.

How we need humility before God! In fact, we all need a fresh dose of Romans 1:16-17, and we need to relearn why we should not be ashamed of the gospel and why we can trust in God’s power. We need to relearn what it means to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. We

7. Barth, 128.

8. Barth, 128-129.

need to recall what God has saved us from and how Christ's call to come to Him with our burdens and heavy load applies to us first.

Meanwhile, and therefore, the answer is not simply: more hard work, more commitment, more theological labor, more hours in the study—not any of those things without *faith in the Christ*, without *humility before God*.

Understand: If one preacher is malnourished and emaciated, another suffers from an equally unhealthy sort of overeating in this department. You know how this goes: preaching is not merely the Alpha and Omega of his ministry, but the substitute for his whole ministry. This is the pastor who is really and *only* a preacher. I call this Vince Lombardi pastoring. Coach Lombardi was reported to have said, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." Likewise, we meet pastors who conceive of ministry along those lines: "*Preaching* isn't everything, it's the only thing." Theological discourse is the only letter in his alphabet. Theology is his first love and his *only* love. All else is ignored. Such a preacher has no interest in current events, novels, the arts, history, sports—or even other people. He is interested only in his theological books and sermons. These sorts of ministers do not know their flock! They cannot call the sheep by name! Their study is a fence with no doors from the outside. Not that they don't talk to their congregants, they do, but only in a hyper-theological way.⁹ This is all quite mistaken and it is not the mark of a humble pastor or a humble pulpit.

Perhaps a warning from Ecclesiastes 7:16 is in order here: "Be not righteous overmuch, and do not make yourself over wise; why should you destroy yourself?" Not only do you make yourself a bore to others, you yourself become stale, overstuffed, and boring. As one modern theologian has written: "*Concentrated* theological work is a good thing, or even the best thing, but *exclusive* theological existence is *not* a good thing. Such existence, in which a man actually plays the deadly role of a God unconcerned about his creation, must sooner or later inevitably lead to doubt, in fact to radical doubt."¹⁰

When you preach the Word as a doubter, you may roar like a lion and thunder like a storm, but all you're doing is trying to hide your own fears and deny your own questions. You might sound like God's champion, but you know you're Satan's coward. So, let this be said, no preacher—young, old, veteran, green-horn—should doubt that to some degree or other "he is *also* a doubter."¹¹ That itself is a call to humility in your work of proclamation. Your doubts call you back to the author and finisher of your faith (Heb. 12:2).

Being a doubter, let me also say, does not mean you should despair. Bring your doubts and unbelief into the light of God's gracious goodness. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isa. 42:3). Also 2 Tim. 2:13: "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself." No one, not professors at seminaries—especially not professors at seminaries—escapes doubt. But God is faithful! This is why Jesus taught us to pray: "Thy kingdom come!"—a high-minded prayer that is insincere if not offered in humility.

9. Cf. Barth, 130.

10. Barth, 131.

11. Barth, 131.

God Is Judge

Thirdly, another reason we must approach homiletics, homileis, and our week-to-week sermons with humility is that *God is Judge*. Really, who among us here can acquit himself of all carelessness, of all freedom from error, of all proper emphasis and balance and truth in his preaching? Who among us can guarantee, even boast, that he is free from the Lord's reprimand?

The Reformed have always rightly emphasized the centrality of preaching as God's principal means of grace, by which he is pleased ordinarily to nurture his covenant people in faith, call the lost to repentance, and sustain the church in the truth. But in affirming that we don't fall into a version of the Romish error of *ex opere operato*—by the deed performed the blessing is imparted. Sometimes I think some zealous and badly educated Reformed pastors believe that. It isn't so. God is free to *hide his face* from our pulpit endeavors. Micah 3:4 reminds us that God can hide his face in just this way. This is nothing less than a withholding of the power and blessing of the Holy Spirit.¹²

Ask yourself a question: Do you think God owes the Holy Spirit to your church and to your preaching? If so, where's the humility in that? Faithfulness does not spell numerical success necessarily. God can withhold his Spirit for a variety of reasons, and not because you're more unfaithful than the next guy. In part, whether a church is conservative or progressive, confessional or non-confessional, presbyterial or independent, whatever the case may be, we must always watch out for self-satisfaction—both *with* ourselves and *in* ourselves. Indeed, I have little doubt that URC pastors labor hard in preaching. I little doubt, too, that you attempt excellent work. But what counts as excellent work? Be careful! Orderliness and following the right methods and reading the right people does not as such make effective ministry of the Word. Things can be in order but things may still not be right. To paraphrase the words of Karl Barth: To be sure, though all looks to be in order; in fact, everything is in the saddest disorder. The mill is turning, but there is no grist to grind. Every sail is hoisted, but no wind fills them to drive the ship. The fountain ornamented with many spouts is there, but no water flows from them. Learning—much learning—is present, but God hasn't given the illumination that counts as knowledge. Piety is present as well, but God hasn't ignited the faith that catches fire and spreads its blessing. What appears to be happening there does not actually happen. In truth, God—the supposed reason and focus of all this activity, all this preaching and teaching and theological labor—remains silent about what is thought and said *about him* when it is not *by him* as its source and foundation. Therefore it is not inappropriate to liken what happens in our proclamation about God (with some variation) to the famous text in Amos 5:1: I hate, I despise your lectures and seminars, your sermons, addresses, and Bible studies, and I take no delight in your blogs and chat-lists, your discussions, assemblies, conventions or pastors' conferences. For when you parade your pulpit prowess, your clever alliterations, your pastoral bits of wisdom before one another and before me, I take no pleasure in them; I detest these offerings of your fatted calves. Take away from me the stir you old fellows cause with your fat books and you young fellows with your dissertations! I will not listen to the melody

12. See Barth, 134.

of the articles and reviews you compose in your theological journals and church magazines. No, I, the Lord, am not impressed.

Yes, indeed, it is an altogether dreadful affair when God keeps silent, and in keeping silent speaks.¹³

Of course, I'm not saying that this is necessarily the case (though it can be and might be). I am saying that we lack humility—and the shadow of divine threat looms over us—when we consider ourselves invulnerable and immune to God's scrutiny and displeasure; as if we could not suffer His fatherly discipline.

Humility in preaching—humility *in your preaching*—must acknowledge the divine prerogative that when you have done your best, preached your best, labored most faithfully, you are but an unprofitable servant and have only done your duty. God owes you nothing. To be sure, his Word will not return to him empty but will accomplish that which he has purposed (Isa. 55:11), but what he accomplishes through our feeble skills as preachers is his choice and privilege, not ours. So be humble. Even Jesus' earthly ministry was a bit slender in the area of numerical stats and devout pillars.

Beware! In our preaching and speaking about God, *God overhears!* Even if we should manage to keep from breaking the first commandment, the second and the third are next in order. O how human *vanity* lurks at the door of our preaching! It shows itself not in what we say about our preaching—for of course (under our own assessment) it is biblical and faithful and *biblically* faithful and *faithfully* biblical. Vanity is exposed in what we say when others criticize our preaching. I like to tell the students that we are all prone to regard our sermons like our children. Perhaps we will admit their flaws to ourselves but we jolly well don't like others pointing out their flaws to us. "Look at your son, what big buck teeth he has; look at your daughter, how gangling and pigeon-toed she is."

"Maybe so!" you say, "but I love my son, buck teeth and all—what's so bad about his malocclusion? I love my daughter; she's just at an awkward age."

And that is how we treat (and defend) our sermons. We flare into temper when others don't appreciate them. Indeed, *vanity* easily attaches itself to preaching.

So ask yourself some questions: Do your elders, at your invitation, routinely evaluate your preaching? Do you bristle at the prospect? Have you helped your elders to explore what goes into a well executed sermon? Do you want to improve? Have you decided that you know what you know and have little to learn? Don't stop learning about preaching and don't stop learning about *your* preaching—what is heard (versus what you intended to be heard), what themes are emphasized (is your preaching biblically balanced and pastorally apt?), what melody do your sermons play (is it the same old song?). Ask yourself, too, whether your sermons are too thick or too thin. Are they repetitive, filling in space and time? Belabored? Redundant? Do you preach to meet your needs first? Do you know your flock so well that you struggle to keep the sermon in bounds? Indeed, you must ask yourself these and many other such questions.

Every seminary professor can testify that an arrogant, conceited student, even if he is quite bright, is not really educable. Pride stands in the way. Humility, however, places a student in the posture to learn. For the kingdom

13. Barth, 135-36.

of God is not about who is the greatest. Even Jesus' disciples couldn't help but debate this question among themselves! We must resist such things. Who pastors the most impressive church? Who does most of the talking at classis? Who blogs out his opinion on every theological happening?

Again, humility seems to have been buried along the way. Keep in mind: Conceit does not look pretty even on a pretty girl. It certainly doesn't look pretty on the face of your sermons. In fact, our preaching is in constant need of the liturgical *Kyrie Eleison* (*Κύριε ἐλέησον*), "Lord, have mercy!"

The work of proclamation faces the same temptation as the theological classroom, for by their fruits you will know them.

I'm always struck by Jesus' words of woe to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in Matt. 23:13-16a, for their fruits, which God discerns, exposes the truth of their labor: Shutting the kingdom of heaven in men's faces, while they themselves are not entering in, and even preventing those who are trying to enter; traveling over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, they make him twice as much a son of hell as they are. Says Jesus: "Woe to you, blind guides!" Here is (in their labor) preaching of the Word that is not preaching of the Word; here is service to God that is not service to God. Indeed, here is service to the Messiah that is in fact service to the anti-Messiah, service to anti-Christ.

Perhaps about now you are ready to tell me that you're no Pharisee; you teach the gospel; and maybe you think I've forgotten that lofty subject heading from the Second Helvetic Confession, which says: PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD.

Yes, yes, I quote it myself from time to time. But don't forget, *what* you preach must be the Word of God. It doesn't say: Sermonizing is the Word of God. Second, don't forget that faithful preaching of the Word of God is only derivatively Word of God. It isn't inspired Word of God; it isn't plenary Word of God. It isn't infallible or inerrant Word of God. It remains human speech explaining and applying the inscripturated, inspired, infallible, plenary Word of God.¹⁴ Your sermon remains a humble servant of the Word of God; and so do you! Indeed, *Kyrie Eleison* (*Κύριε ἐλέησον*), "Lord, have mercy!"

Even in affirming those lofty words from the Second Helvetic, it shouldn't be controversial to say that your servant work of preaching is human, flawed, sometimes sinful, imperfect, corrupted, always limited—sometimes quite uninspiring and trite (dare I say, boring?). And the Holy Spirit manages to shoot straight with your crooked arrows. God owns your preaching and takes it up into his service of the Word. He makes it do his work. He uses it to bring clarity to the obscure, to heighten awareness where there is dullness, to be an instrument—and only an instrument—in his sovereign work of calling and regeneration. *That's humbling* to contemplate! Preaching lives by divine mercy. Your preaching lives by divine mercy. More, your preaching cannot exist as God's vessel of blessing to the church and to the world except by his mercy. Therefore your preaching must be simultaneously high-minded and humble. If it isn't, it is doomed as a sickness unto death. No room for boasting.

As the apostle reminds us about the ministry in general: "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or

14. It seems to me that the "is," speaking philosophically, is not that of *identity* or of *inclusion* or of *membership*, but of *attribution* (having the property [along with other properties] of being word of God).

straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

III. God's Humble Lion: *the Now What?*

Given that warning, *now what?* We've seen *that* we are to be God's lions—humble-servant lions. We've seen *why* we need to become humble and fight pride from infecting our preaching. Now I offer you *the now what?*—just two observations about the remedy to our prideful propensity to become conceited, smug, big-headed, self-important, and self-righteous in the preaching department.

Prayer

The first and fundamental remedy to prideful preaching is *prayer*.¹⁵ (I hope you're not disappointed by that observation!) Let me say it stronger: Prayer must be the center of all that remains to be said (and obviously I'm not talking about prayer as a hoop to jump through). This is not to set careful *study* in competition with prayer, or to denigrate the hard labor of exegesis, and the still even harder labor of application from the text to your context. To be sure, writing and delivering sermons requires study and is part of the ministry of the Word, even as it is, properly, a labor of *love to God* and to neighbor. Prayer is prior because prayer itself expresses humility; prayer is our declaration of dependence on God; prayer is our admitting that unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain (Ps. 127:1). Prayer is our acknowledgement that one man plants and another waters, but God alone gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). Without prayer, the preacher labors in a prison without windows, a prison of his own strength, powers, and imagination. He is unbiblically isolated and to himself—lonely. The light of lights is ignored, for God is ignored even while his Word is studied. For in prayer a man temporarily turns away from his own efforts. He puts himself out of the picture. He stands before God, his Lord, his Savior, his Judge—and he asks in Jesus' name, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bless this, his sermonic work in the study and without. Prayer is the admission and the humble confession that God alone makes my doings fruitful. After all, you are to preach Christ, not yourself.

And with prayer is coupled *confession*, for you bring your sins and selfish or lazy or prideful propensities to the altar of mercy. Confession doesn't mean wallowing in self-hatred—a constant state of self-laceration over faults, real or imagined. But confession does mean admitting and despising where we took the wrong option, gave into the wrong habit, said the stupid or hurtful word, indulged in some self-boasting, or spoke half-truths to protect ourselves or to diminish someone else. Confession does mean repenting and lamenting when we choose the easy way out; and it means that we ask God to cleanse us anew because of the cross of Christ.

15. See Barth, 159ff.

Service and Suffering

The second remedy to prideful preaching (the remedy to our failure to serve the Lord in our preaching in all humility) is *service and suffering*. “When we learn to serve someone else, to do something which would normally be beneath us, it has the effect of helping us forget ourselves. Humility is not absent-mindedness; as C.S. Lewis once put it, ‘Humility is thinking less about yourself, not thinking less of yourself.’ It isn’t telling ourselves that we’re useless, a waste of space, better off dead and so on. More often than not this is self-pity [not piety]. It doesn’t mean lying about our qualities, our gifts, abilities and achievements. The truly humble person isn’t always telling people how humble they really are.”¹⁶ You’re not to play the role of Uriah Heep. “Humble people are not self-haters, they just don’t think about themselves much—they are far more interested in other people.”¹⁷

Humility enables us to suffer for Christ’s sake. As the Apostle commands the young pastor, Timothy, “share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God” (2 Tim. 1:8). And then in the next chapter: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:3). And in chapter 4:5: “endure suffering.” Humility enables us to serve and to suffer. Serving and suffering teaches us humility.

In other words, refuse to play God—even to play a little god. Cease setting yourself up as king of all you survey! Step down off your throne and admit that you are called to deny yourself and bear a cross. As you do so also admit that you need God’s people, and most of all you need the Lord. That empty throne is designed for God alone, your Creator and Redeemer.

Dear brothers, I know; I’ve been there. I know that people, our parishioners, can be hard nuts to crack (just like the worldlings)—which brings us back to Matthew 11 and Jesus’ words about John the Baptist. Parishioners can deeply disappoint pastors, by their lack of humility, by their immaturity, by their judgmental spirit, by their refusal to love God and to love the church. Jesus is quite focused in his comments about the response to John’s preaching and to His own.

If you preach in John-mode, if you roar too loud, if you preach the gospel with too much admonition and exhortation, they might regard you as a narrow-minded prig, a stuffed shirt who can only preach in funeral mode. You wail, but they do not mourn. They might even conclude that you have a demon! But if you preach in Jesus-mode, if you celebrate divine grace, if you console too often, if you preach forgiveness too generously, they might write you off as a softy on sin who doesn’t take godly living seriously. Your preaching is like one big wedding day! You play the flute but they do not dance. Look at our pastor, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

But take a lesson in humility, and from our Lord: wisdom is vindicated by her deeds (cf. Matt. 11:16-19). May I venture to say that *humility* will be vindicated by its deeds as well? May your preaching be vindicated because it is marked by wisdom and humility!

God’s Lion or His Humble Servant? Yes! Both! Be God’s humbled roaring lion. Preach the Word, serving the Lord with all humility.

16. Graham Tomlin, *The Seven Deadly Sins and How to Overcome Them* (Oxford: Lion, 2007), 53.

17. Tomlin, 53-54.