

MODESTY

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Lesson: Luke 18: 1-14

Today we wish to speak to you about the virtue of modesty. You can all have some idea of what this virtue is. If a man trusts only in himself, is sure that he is always right and everyone else is wrong, is forward, bold, or boastful, is self-satisfied, and so puffed up with conceit that he cannot see beyond himself, he is not modest. But if he does not have any of these bad things in him he is a truly modest man, and he has this very important virtue.

Perhaps it may seem strange that we should try to tell you what modesty is by first saying what it is not. But that is the only way in which it can be described, and is, indeed, the way we come to it. You will remember that we are to seek from the Lord the virtues about which we are speaking. We are not born into them. Of ourselves we tend to do things which are exactly opposite to them, and it is as we stop doing those opposite things because they are sins against the Lord that He can give us the virtues we seek. So if you can imagine a person who does not do or think any of the bad things we have mentioned, you will have in your picture of him an idea of what modesty is; and if you think of the lesson we just read (Luke 18:1-14), you will be helped still more to form that idea, for the Pharisee who was so very sure of himself is an example of immodesty, and in the publican who was so humble we have a picture of a truly modest man.

If we think about ourselves, we will probably see that there is something in us which is preventing the Lord from giving us the virtue of modesty. Perhaps we are among those who think that nothing can be done properly unless they do it themselves, or who are quite sure when a difference arises that they cannot possibly be wrong. Maybe we are inclined to thrust ourselves forward, to want all the attention of any company in which we are to be given to us, to push others out of the way, and to boast of the wonderful things we have done. Perhaps we are so satisfied with ourselves that we think we will never need to change, or conceited and inclined to overrate our own importance. But whatever it is, if we acknowledge it as a fault and try very hard not to do it any more, the Lord will give us true modesty, and that is the virtue we should seek.

We must try to learn that other people can do things as well as we can, maybe better; and that we are just as likely to be wrong as anyone else. We must learn to stay in the background if necessary, to share attentions with others, to realize that they too have their rights which we must respect, and not to talk too much about our achievements. We must be able to see that we can always

change for the better, and that no matter how much we have done we really have nothing to be conceited about. As we do learn these things we become modest people.

But there is also a kind of modesty we must be careful never to make our own, it is called false modesty, and we see it in people who are always making unkind remarks about themselves and belittling their achievements, not because they really mean what they say, but because they want you to say that it is not so at all, and then praise and flatter them. Such people are really very conceited. They are so proud of themselves that they seek praise by doing this if they cannot get it in any other way; and those who meet them often soon become very tired of them.

To be modest it is not necessary to belittle our abilities, or to pretend that we do not possess good qualities we know quite well we possess. A man may know that he excels everyone else in some particular thing, and still be modest if he remembers that others excel in other directions, does not take credit to himself for his achievement, and does not become conceited. A man who is modest is one who is able to see clearly his own worth, who knows fairly well what are his good points and what his bad ones. And he is always quick to see, and eager to praise, outstanding ability in other people. He is not jealous because someone else in his own profession or business does better work than himself, for he knows that all men cannot be alike, and is only too glad to think that others are benefiting from work better than his own.

Now why do you suppose the Lord wants us to become like that, to grow up into modest men and women? It is because He wants to give us, when we leave this world, the greatest happiness anyone can possibly have, the happiness of living forever in heaven with Him. He alone knows the way to heaven, and can lead us to it, and we can enter heaven only if we are able to believe that everything we have there is from the Lord. So we must learn to trust in the Lord and not in ourselves, to see that He is always right and that we are often wrong, and to give Him the credit for everything good and useful in our lives. And we can humble ourselves in this way only if we first become truly modest.
Amen.