

### **Exalted Baptismal Instruction**

The Bible is not a “how-to manual” on what you need to do or not do in order to merit God’s grace and favor. We know this. And yet... today’s lessons seem to directly *contradict* this. Proverbs tells us how we are to not put ourselves forward or exalt ourselves in the presence of the king. Why? It never ends well. Don’t do that. St. Paul instructs the Ephesians (and all of us) to walk in a manner worthy of our baptismal calling, with all gentleness, patience, and humility. Here’s how to be a good Christian. Here’s what you are to do. Jesus Himself teaches very plainly: When you go to a feast, don’t take the high place of honor. That won’t turn out well. Instead, go to the lowest place so that you can be exalted. You want to avoid humiliation? You want to be exalted in the presence of God at His heavenly banquet? *Here’s how you do it.* Tell me again how the Bible isn’t a how-to manual? Better yet, tell Jesus.

Now, before anyone thinks that I’m going all works-righteous on you, **RELAX!** We are saved through faith, and not our works. Faith alone in God’s grace alone because of Christ alone. That’s it! God is very clear on this, from Genesis to Revelation. Still... what do we do with these passages? Well... let’s go back to what we know; what God has already told us, again and again and again. God **never** gives “how-to instructions” on what we need to do *in order to* bring about forgiveness and salvation. The reason is simple. There’s **nothing** we can do to bring about or merit His forgiveness or favor. If there was a way we could earn/merit His forgiveness and favor, then He wouldn’t have sent His only-begotten Son to die for us. We’d just have to step up our game and work harder at following the how-to instructions. The cross of Christ proves that this cannot be, and is not even a possibility.

And yet... our Lord clearly does give us instructions, right? Why? The answer isn’t what you think; *not naturally, at least.* Our Old Adam nature is to approach these words of our Lord as “how-to” instruction; i.e., here’s *how* you get exalted. Do this, that, and the other thing, and then God will exalt you. This makes sense to us. After all, this is how the world works, right? *Quid pro quo* is what makes the world go. I do something for you, and you—in turn—do something for me; favor for favor. It stands to reason, then, that if I humble myself, God will—in turn—exalt me. ***Folks: That’s works-righteousness. You’re doing something in order to merit God’s favor/exaltation.*** Call it whatever you want, but that’s what it is.

What if we’re coming at this all wrong? By nature, we wrongly begin with the understanding that this is ***prescription***; i.e., here’s what you need to do in order to be exalted. By nature, we begin with “how to be exalted.” Folks: Your Lord

isn't giving you a "how-to" on exaltation. He's giving you a ***description***; an answer as to ***WHY*** you will be exalted. Rather than start with "what do I need to do," faith rightly begins with Christ; "what has He done for me?"

Look to this cross and consider the words of our Epistle lesson. Paul calls for us to "*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we've been called, with all humility, gentleness, and patience.*" (This word is better translated as "long-suffering.") Think about this. God is the One who called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light. He called you out of death into life. He comes to you and calls you by His Word. He came to you and put His name on you in the waters of His Holy Baptism. To walk in a manner worthy of our calling is to walk in our Baptismal righteousness; to walk in a way that gives all the glory to the Way, the Truth, and the Life. To walk in our Baptismal calling is humble ***response*** to God's free and undeserved gifts of mercy, grace, and unconditional righteousness. There is no *quid pro quo* on either side! God doesn't grant us grace because of what we do for Him, nor does faith do what it does in order to merit God's gifts. No! ***We do what we do simply out of joyous response to what God has done for us.*** We love because He first loved us. We forgive because He has forgiven us.

As for humility, gentleness, and long-suffering patience, these are virtues that are not inherent to children of Adam. These are gifts given from above; gifts wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. Again, these aren't prescriptions, as if you need to have these things in order to be saved. ***These are descriptions of those who are saved.*** By nature, we're not humble or gentle or patient. We're self-centered and works-righteous and impatient and vengeful, always trying to build ourselves up, even when it means tearing others down.

This is why I tell you (instruct you) to look to the cross; look to Christ. These virtues (humility, gentleness, long-suffering patience) are not inherent to children of Adam. ***These are virtues exemplified in Christ.*** We confess this in our creed. The God of all glory humbled Himself for our sake. He humbled Himself by giving up all of heaven's majesty/glory by taking on our flesh, conceived, born in a lowly manger, suffering, and dying... for us. "*He humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.*" These virtues aren't just exemplified by Christ; **they ARE Christ!** "*Take My yoke upon you, for I am meek and lowly and gentle. I am long-suffering and patient.*" "**I AM.**" **That's not prescription! That's divine description!** Through the working of the Holy Spirit, this is also baptismal description of all those in Christ. "***Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized were baptized into His death and resurrection?***"

Folks: This is why the faithful humble themselves. ***HE*** is why the faithful humble themselves before the King of kings and all others whom Christ loved

enough to die for. Baptized into Christ, the baptized child of grace knows who they are, by nature, and where they came from. Faith knows/believes the Truth. My sin put Jesus on that cross. I think about that a lot... and it horrifies me. My sin is so great and heinous that God Himself had to take on flesh and shed His blood and die in order to make the ransom payment for me. I know my place. I deserve nothing but present and eternal punishment.

Purely by God's grace, though, because of the all-redeeming work and person of Jesus Christ, I have been called into His marvelous light. ***In spite of me and my sin—my shame***—I have been baptized by Him and made a member of His royal household; a co-heir with Christ of the Kingdom of Heaven. Through repentant faith, I know my place, and not even the gates of hell can steal it away from me. To say it's humbling is an understatement. ***How do you say “thank you” for such an undeserved and amazing gift?*** Answer: Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called, with all humility, gentleness, and long-suffering patience, bearing with one another just like Christ—in love—and eager to maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace; the peace that passes and surpasses all human understanding.

And if you're still not humbled, look around. Your King and Lord exalts you today in the presence of all men, calling you and inviting you to His feast table, where angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven are gathered. You come to the earthly end of the King's feast table, ***and the King of heaven and earth comes to serve you.*** “*Take and eat. Take and drink. This is given and shed FOR YOU.*” Talk about exaltation! Talk about a place of honor! And the best is still yet to come. More and greater exaltation awaits. Your Lord has already prepared your heavenly mansion room for you. **He knows your place!** Your spot at the heavenly side of the eternal feast is already prepared and reserved. When your pilgrim walk through this veil of tears is complete, your Lord will send His holy angels to bring you home to Him, where you will hear Him say to you in the presence of all those angels, archangels, and company of heaven: “*Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into our Father's rest.*” I guess the only remaining question is: ***How does all this divine exaltation NOT humble you?***

May Jesus Christ and His humility, His gentleness, His long-suffering patience, grace, mercy, love, and peace be with you, remain with you, and be exalted through you, now and into all eternity.

To Him be all the glory, praise, and honor... **AMEN.**