Today we will conclude our 30-week series entitled, Believe. If you are new to Colonial, the Believe series has been devoted to exploring the ten core beliefs the ten core practices, and the ten core virtues of the Christian faith. This morning we will unpack the tenth and final virtue of the Christian life—the virtue of humility.

Now, before I jump into humility, please remember that the Christian virtues become part of our character when we surrender our lives to Jesus and the Holy Spirit begins to transform us from the inside out. Please remember—the process of Christian transformation is largely God’s doing; in other words, we are both saved by grace and transformed by grace. However, as believers, we can either participate willingly in this transformation process or we can frustrate it. To willingly participate in the process of transformation is to first allow our minds to be conformed to Christ. That is to say, we must come not only to believe in Jesus, but to believe Jesus and to believe what Jesus believed. What we believe makes its way from our heads to hearts by means of what we practice. So, the practical role that we play in our own transformation also requires us to practice life differently…to practice living out our beliefs through the spiritual disciplines of Jesus. As our minds are conformed to Christ, and our habits change through new practices, we will begin to see the fruit of the Spirit in our character. Paul describes this fruit in Galatians 5 as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” The New Testament also accentuates the virtues of hope and humility. When these virtues become obvious in our lives, we know that we are increasingly becoming like Jesus…and that is always the goal of the Christian life: to become like Jesus and to lead others to become like Jesus.

So, with this process of Christian transformation in mind, let us now consider the Christian virtue of humility. As always, there is far more to say about this subject than I have time to cover. If you have not already done so, please read Pastor Randy Frazee’s treatment of humility in the Believe book that we are reading together as a church. Frazee provides a beautiful sampling of scripture that reveals the virtue of Christ-like humility with great clarity. Along with a number of articles, I will also point you to C. S. Lewis’s Mere Christianity, particularly the chapter on “The Great Sin.” Lewis’s work on the problem of pride and the virtue of humility is the most profound that I’ve ever read. I will only be able to briefly touch on it this morning, but there is a gold-mine there for those will take the time to read it. Because this subject is so profoundly misunderstood in our culture, I will attempt to unpack the virtue of humility under these three sub-headings: 1) the myth of high self-esteem; 2) the pernicious nature of pride; and 3) the essential nature of Christian humility. Each subheading could be a sermon-series, so I hope this message will serve as motivation for us all to read deeply on this subject.

I. The Myth of High Self-Esteem

Let me begin by saying that when it comes to humility, “I am by the far the MOST humble person you will ever meet! I love how humble I am; I am certainly more humble than most; and my strength in humility makes me happy, productive, and popular with other people!”
Now…what I just said is ironic, right? Bragging about being humble is a total contradiction. I cannot be bragging about how proud I am of myself, and at the same time be exhibiting the virtue of humility. As we all know, pride and humility are completely incompatible. But now let me ask you a question: the person who just bragged about being happy, productive, and popular…even as he brags about being humble…do you think that person has a high self-esteem or a low self-esteem? Clearly that person has a high self-esteem, right? He loves who he is, he is proud of who he is, he is both confident and assertive regarding his value and his personhood. And yet…there is not a shred of humility to be found. This is exactly the tension that exists in our western culture when it comes to the subject of humility.

I was a child of the 70’s and 80’s…arguably the first two decades that placed immense focus on the “self-esteem” of people. Many of you probably remember all the “self-esteem” talks we got in school as well as the popular songs that talked about “loving yourself,” right? Who could forget the famous Whitney Houston lyrics, “I found the greatest Love of all inside of me; the greatest love of all is easy to achieve; Learning to love yourself—it is the greatest love of all.” “To love yourself is the greatest love of all”…that, in a nutshell, sums up what is now affectionately known as “the self-esteem movement.”

The self-esteem movement got its start through the doctrine of popular psychologists in the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s. Nathaniel Branden, a leading figure in the self-esteem movement, stated categorically that “self-esteem has profound consequences for every aspect of our existence” and, more pointedly, that he “cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molestation—that is not traceable to the problem of low self-esteem.” Psychologist Andrew Mecca is cited as saying that virtually every social problem can be traced to people's lack of self-love.

In a scholarly article published in 2003 entitled, Does High Self-Esteem Cause Better Performance, Interpersonal Success, Happiness, or Healthier Lifestyles? the researchers observed that “the self-esteem movement” in its earliest expression back in the 80’s was not based upon research as much as it was based on a hunch. For example, psychologists observed that people who suffered from depression generally reported having low self-esteem…meaning they did not think well of themselves; whereas those who reported being happy, popular, and competent were those who thought quite well of themselves…they had high self-esteem. Thus, they assumed that the secret to getting people out of depression, off drugs, off the unemployment lines, and into a productive, healthy lifestyle meant boosting up their self-esteem. The formula was simple: help people to love themselves, and the health of our society will improve. It did not take long before this popular psychology spread like wildfire throughout America. In 1986, the State Legislature of California founded the "California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility." There is now a National Association for Self-Esteem. For the last 40 years, our culture’s obsession with self-esteem has profoundly influenced our morality, our music, our education system, our laws, and even our pulpits. Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral was a shining example of positive thinking/preaching designed to improve self-esteem for all those who attended. Our concern for self-esteem explains why everybody now gets a trophy at our kid’s soccer games regardless of who wins. Our efforts to build our kid’s self-esteem explains why many believe they are too “special” to take an entry level position.
coming out of college. Our concern for self-esteem has fueled a multi-billion-dollar industry of self-help books, self-talk tapes, and motivational speakers. We have created self-esteem programs in schools in which the main objective is, as Jennifer Coon-Wallman, a psychotherapist based in Boston, says, "to dole out huge helpings of praise, regardless of actual accomplishments." But here’s the question of the day: does inflating people’s self-esteem work? Do people with high self-esteem perform better at school or on the job? Do people with an inflated sense of self-admiration succeed in relationships, use less drugs or spend less time in prison? What do the facts actually reveal? The researchers in the 2003 article I just mentioned, along with a New York Times article entitled, “The Trouble with Self Esteem,” make several conclusions based upon the evidence. Dr. Emler from the London School of Economics observes, "There is absolutely no evidence that low self-esteem is particularly harmful. It’s not at all a cause of poor academic performance; people with low self-esteem seem to do just as well in life as people with high self-esteem. In fact, they may do better, because they often try harder." Whereas people with high self-esteem are more assertive and persistent, people with low self-esteem are more teachable and willing to take direction. Whereas people with a high self-esteem report feeling happy, successful and popular, they are also alarmingly likely to be narcissistic, hard to work with, and unwilling to acknowledge their weaknesses, failures, and undesirable qualities. When it comes to violent behavior, those who had an inflated sense of self-importance were more likely to be hostile towards those who challenged their self-perception of greatness as compared to those with a low self-esteem. According to the report, “[In 2002 alone] there were three withering studies of self-esteem released in the United States, all of which had the same central message: people with high self-esteem pose a greater threat to those around them than people with low self-esteem; and feeling bad about yourself is not the cause of our country's biggest, most expensive social problems.”

The facts don’t lie: our obsession with boosting the self-esteem of our children by telling them they are always wonderful when they are not has backfired. We are now the most narcissistic nation in the world, which means we have an overinflated sense of our own importance with a decreasing ability to feel and show empathy. With the noblest of intentions, our pre-occupation with self-esteem has created the perfect breeding ground for the world’s worst kind of evil: pride.

II. The Pernicious Nature of Pride

When we study the Hebrew and Greek terms for pride in the Bible, the most common understanding of “the proud” is those who are arrogant, haughty, and boastful. These are people who are very pleased with who they are or how they are, particularly in comparison or in competition with others. Now…at this moment we all have someone in mind that fits that description, right? We all know someone who is haughty, arrogant and boastful…someone who posts pictures online of huge stringers of fish and then subtly teases his friend who didn’t catch as many fish…that kind of a person, right?

Or perhaps we’re thinking of that self-righteous religious person who always points out everybody else’s flaws but can’t seem to see his own arrogance and lack of grace.

Maybe we’re thinking of people we know who will never admit that they are wrong…they are an “expert” on every subject in their own estimation. They are easily offended, generally angry, and
always “misunderstood and unappreciated.” Church, whatever you do in the next few seconds, do NOT look at your spouse!

Look, we all know someone we believe to be proud and arrogant…and we all condemn such behavior. The truth is however, that most of us cannot see our own problem with pride. C. S. Lewis writes, “There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.” So…how do we know if we have a pride problem? Lewis writes, “…if you want to find out how proud you are, the easiest way is to ask yourself, ‘How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronize me, or show off?’

I remember the first time that I read these words, I was horrified. I always thought that my complete disgust with proud, arrogant people was an indicator of my humility…but it’s just the opposite, according to Lewis. When I reflected upon what Lewis was saying, I was horrified to discover that I have HUGE pride issues, particularly when driving in a car with my wife! I clearly pride myself on being a good driver, and I know this because I get very angry when Christy tells me where to turn when I already know where I am going; or when she points out a car that is slowing down in front of me when I can clearly see the car in front of me. I literally feel rage in my heart when she “reminds me” of these little things, even though I know she is just trying to be helpful. I get offended because I interpret her comments as patronizing and condescending…as if I’m incompetent and in need of her assistance. I now know that I can’t stand to be patronized…I can’t stand to be treated like I’m ignorant or an idiot…and any hint of that kind of treatment causes me to lose my cool every time. And it’s NOT because I’m humble…it’s because I am proud…far more proud than my Christian faith tells me I should be.

How about you? What sets you off? What pushes your pride button? Need a little more help identifying your pride problem? Look to the way you compare yourself to others. Look how often you make a competition out of the smallest things. Lewis writes, Pride is competitive by its very nature. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Nearly all those evils in the world which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of Pride.

Are you there yet? Can you see your pride? We all have it…no one is immune. Pride is a big problem. As Lewis writes, “Pride is a spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense. It is Pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.”

Think about how remarkably contrary our cultural thinking is in comparison to what Lewis just said. Our culture thinks poor self-esteem is the chief cause of misery, so they say, “Be Proud!” But the Bible says, “Pride is the chief cause of misery, be humble.”
Pride separates us from God…you know that, right? The proud person cannot possibly know God. Lewis comments on this as well: In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all.

Did you know that there is only one group of people in all the world that God consistently opposes in the Bible? It’s not the Muslims or the atheists or the sexually immoral or the murderers. God seems to have an awful lot of grace for every kind of sinner in the world except for one that he unapologetically opposes…vehemently so, in fact. And what group of people is that?

James 4:6, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”
1 Peter 5:5, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”
Isaiah 2:12: For the LORD of hosts will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty and against everyone who is lifted up.
Psalm 119:21 You rebuke the arrogant, the cursed, who wander from Your commandments.
Proverbs 15:25 The LORD will tear down the house of the proud, But He will establish the boundary of the widow.
Jeremiah 50:31 "Behold, I am against you, O arrogant one," Declares the Lord GOD of hosts, "For your day has come, The time when I will punish you."

I could go on, but you get the point: God is opposed to the proud. Why? Lewis writes, “As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”

God is not a big fan of the self-esteem movement. That doesn’t mean that God wants us to be self-loathing, depressed, and feeling worthless…not at all. But in light of God’s glory and God’s perfect holiness—our concept of self cannot possibly remain proud.

Lewis writes: The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether. If you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble—delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you restless and unhappy all your life. He is trying to make you humble in order to make this moment possible: trying to take off a lot of the silly, ugly, fancy-dress in which we have all got ourselves up and are strutting about like the little idiots we are. To get even near it, even for a moment, is like a drink of cold water to a man in the desert. If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.

Church…we have a pride problem, and God calls us to humble…so what does it mean to be humble?

III. The Essential Nature of Christian Humility
When we look to the Bible, there are four different words in the Hebrew that are commonly translated as “humble.” The first word is *ani*, which refers to those who have been humbled by the circumstances of life. These are the poor, the crippled, the blind, the outcasts, the widows, the orphans…those who have no choice but to depend on the mercy and generosity of others to survive. God has compassion on the *ani*, and He expects His people to make special provision for the “humble” who are in great need.

The next word for humble is *anav*. *Anav* refers to those who have humbled themselves and placed their faith in God. Whereas *ani* refers to humility through circumstances, *anav* refers to humility as a mark of one’s character, though quite often *anav* comes quite naturally for the *ani*.

When we think of the humility of Jesus Christ, we find both *ani* and *anav*. Jesus was *ani* in that he was afflicted, He became poor and was oppressed, falsely accused, and murdered. But Jesus also modeled *anav*…He was humble in His character, serving others and placing His full faith upon the Father.

The third Hebrew term used for humility is the word *shaphel*. *Shaphel* refers to the contrast between high station and low station. When a King leaves his court to associate with and serve the peasants, that would be *shaphel*. When we read the Gospel of John, the first chapter describes the shaphel of the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. The whole story of Christ’s birth to a peasant woman in an animal’s food trough presents the *shaphel* of Christ…it is the humility of the King of Kings who came down and became one of us in the lowliest state.

The fourth word for humility is *kana*. *Kana* refers to the humility required to submit to the will of another. In that great passage found in II Chronicles 7:14, we read, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves (kana), and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” To be humble before God is to submit to His will over your own will. We see Jesus demonstrating *kana* in the Garden of Gethsemane when He prays, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but your will be done.”

As you can see from the study of these four terms, the biblical concept of humility is wholistic, applying to every situation for the believer, regardless of our circumstances. As those who bear the image of Christ, our virtue of humility should lead us to be compassionate and intentional among those who suffer painful circumstances even as we should be willing to endure painful circumstances as the *ani* who are loved by God.

The *anav*…the character trait of humility, is that which we practice in our relationship with God and other people on a daily basis. This is what Paul teaches the believers in Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgement…” God does not call us to think highly of ourselves or think poorly of ourselves…God calls us to think accurately about ourselves. We are to evaluate our esteem based upon who God is and who God says we are. Frazee calls this “God-esteem” rather than “self-esteem.” When we find our identity as those who are dearly loved, saved from our own wretchedness through the unmerited grace of Jesus, and those who have been sent into the world as His ambassadors, our new identity is secure and established. It is our
new identity in Christ that empowers us to live a life of anav…to have the character of humility in our relationship to God and to others. As Paul writes to the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

For those who are in positions of leadership and influence including parents and grandparents, bosses and teachers, we are called to demonstrate the shaphel of Christ. As Paul writes, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” May we never forget our Lord’s example as he knelt and washed the feet of his inferiors…servant leadership requires great humility, and yet that is the very humility that Jesus demonstrated for us. As our character reflects His character, our humility will look like his humility at work and at home.

Finally, and this is my last point for the entire Believe Series…(!)…may we all be known for our kata…our humility of submission to the will of God. The Gospel always calls for our repentance and the humility to yield to God…we are called to surrender. Such humility develops over time, but it is this kind of humility…the humility of submission…that will defend our souls from pride. It is a humility required of all who would be called disciples of Jesus. It is the humility that will be required for our church to be found faithful in the days ahead.

Church, I hope that you have enjoyed this journey called Believe as much as I have. I know my life has been changed, my faith challenged, and my hopes renewed as we have walked this road together. As we enter into the summer months, we will work through a series that rearticulates and reimagines our identity as disciples called, The Tree of Life. At the end of the summer we will provide an assessment tool that will help you discern where you are on this journey of following Jesus. The tool will also help you develop a personalized growth plan, and I look forward to sharing more about that in the weeks to come.

If you have completed this journey of Believe, you now have at your disposal the basic tools to disciple another person, and I hope that you will commit to walk at least one other person through the core beliefs, practices, and virtues of the Christian faith in the next year. I also hope that you will join us this afternoon as we celebrate the conclusion of Believe and share the stories of what we have learned and how God has been moving in our lives.

May we continue our journey together as a church always committed to think like Jesus, to act like Jesus, and to become like Jesus. Amen? Let’s pray.