

## When the Lord Comes Near 4) He Lifts Up The Humbled

Luke 1:39-55 • 2021-12-19 • Advent Series "When the Lord Comes Near"



There's an entertaining internet video in which six musicians are told to play a sample of their music for each other. Then they must rank themselves in order of who has the most talent. After hearing everyone play, they all begin to take turns ranking one another from worst to best. The first musician to play is the first to assess everyone's rank. He starts at the bottom giving someone else sixth place. He hesitates to list the rank near the top, but eventually places himself as the second best. Apparently, it was a hard decision for him to make himself second. But the video goes on. It soon becomes apparent that none of the other musicians in the room agreed with his self-assessment. They all rank him as the worst and the least talented in the room. Then reality set in for him. The internet vote was revealed from the online viewers. He came in last place.

It can be hard to self-evaluate your position. It takes humility to get it right. Could you do it? How about if you had to hear something bigger than the internet's evaluation of you? What about God's evaluation? Could you stand to hear how God would rate everyone in the room you are in right now on the basis of how much of his favor each person has? Does he favor you, or is it someone else better than you? Today we see someone who didn't have to rank herself. But she did say that future generations would all call her blessed. She said that because she believed that God lifts up the humbled. That's what we'll see today as we look at the last of our Advent series, "When the Lord Comes Near." In the first chapter of Luke, we see the Lord coming near two women and an unborn child. And we are assured of a comforting truth: When the Lord comes near, he lifts up the humbled.

God clearly doesn't let pride stand. When sinners place themselves on a pedestal, he puts them in their place. At the beginning of time the Lord God dealt with the proud conceit of the first man and woman. He created them and blessed them abundantly. He gave them charge over all of creation. He even indicated to them how they ranked among all the rest of creation. He set them as the peak, the most favored, of all creation. But in pride they wanted more. They wanted to be like God and tried to elevate themselves. With a rebellious grasp for knowledge, they showed how they no longer trusted their Creator. They joined in rebellion with the devil and were filled with malice, suspicion, and contempt. So, what did God do in response? He did what we so often see him doing on the pages of Scripture. He brought down the proud. He declared that the man and woman would be humbled. They would return back to the dust from which God had brought them. God humbles the proud.

However, he lifts up the lowly. Mary had just received the message from the angel Gabriel that she would be the mother of the Messiah. Her son would sit on David's throne and rule forever. Gabriel told Mary that her child would be holy, conceived in a miraculous way, and be called the Son of God. We don't know exactly what was on Mary's mind. But we do know she was in a hurry to see the first part of the angel's message fulfilled. Gabriel had informed Mary that her relative Elizabeth was already in the sixth month of a pregnancy. Mary hurried to visit her relative. She wanted to see it for herself, and no doubt share in the joy that Elizabeth now had.

There in that town in the hill country we begin to see how the Lord lifts up the lowly. Luke refers to the house as "Zechariah's house." That term reflected the fact that the husband was the head of the household. But God's favor doesn't just rest on the men like Zechariah who served as priests in the temple. In fact, Luke records Zechariah's disgrace. He had been rebuked and chastised by the angel Gabriel for not believing the Lord's message. Meanwhile Elizabeth indicates she had long felt disgrace for not having any children. Before there were fertility clinics that could help identify the solution, the stigma for childlessness often fell to the wife. And there were also social pressures. But it wasn't just social pressure to have children. Elizabeth and her husband had been praying for a child, but she couldn't get pregnant. God turned her world around! Now she was beginning her third trimester! God lifts up the lowly!

God lifted up more of the lowly. As soon as the greeting of Mary reached Elizabeth's ears the baby in her womb leapt for joy. So often today the Christian church loses sight of the importance of little children and babies. Many will often wrongly teach that small children can't possibly have faith. They say children must attain some degree of intellectual development before they can really be a Christian. However, this lowly unborn child in Elizabeth's womb is just as Gabriel prophesied earlier in this chapter. He is, "*Filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.*" The language of Scripture uses the same term for a baby like John inside the womb and for a newborn or a toddler. It uses the same language to refer to the unborn John as it does to describe the newborn Jesus. It uses the same term for the unborn John as for the little children who Jesus welcomed and blessed. That ought to give pause to anyone who doesn't believe babies can have faith. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit -one given to John in his mother's womb. The gift of faith is not given because of the proud intellect or the decision of an adult. It is given by God who lifts up the humbled.

We can't move on without mentioning in brief here how this world often doesn't regard an unborn child to be a person. God, however, does. The unborn leapt for joy! God is in the business of lifting up the lowly, and so should we!

Luke further helps us see how God lifts up the lowly. Women like Elizabeth were often regarded as second-class in ancient Israel. While it is true that God does give men and women different types of roles, he makes it clear they share

equal status before him. Zechariah the man and priest was struck with the inability to speak because of his lack of faith. But his wife, Elizabeth, is filled with the Holy Spirit. God lifts up the lowly!

Being filled with the Holy Spirit can at times mean speaking in tongues. But it is not limited to that gift. In fact, most often being “filled with the Holy Spirit” means the Spirit gave someone a special skill or ability to serve God. Most often the Spirit-filled person demonstrates an ability to speak the Word of God in a clear, bold, and timely way. In this case it is not the priest Zechariah, but his wife who is filled with the Holy Spirit and given a word or prophecy to share with Mary. She assures Mary that what the angel told her is true. The Holy Spirit knew the faith of Mary and encouraged her through the words of Elizabeth. She tells Mary, *“Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.”* Two women who would have been disregarded by the world around them are lifted up on the pages of Scripture. The Lord lifts up the lowly!

And Luke won’t leave us to think Elizabeth was the only woman to get recognition on the pages of Scripture. His gospel account continually mentions women fulfilling their roles with honor and receiving God’s favor. It is the women Elizabeth and Mary who first believe the news of the coming Savior. It is a little girl who is raised to life by Jesus. It is the women who supported Jesus’ ministry who are named by Luke, not the men. It is the women who first believed and reported the resurrection of Jesus. In Luke’s second book, Acts, men still have the responsibility to lead, but it is the women who often shine first. Timothy’s mother was a believer, not his father. The women were the first ones who welcomed missionaries to Macedonia and sent them out with support. Other gospel writers do the same. Matthew and Mark mention Jesus commending a woman for having faith greater than all those in Israel. This was counter-cultural in the ancient world. God didn’t overturn the roles of head and helper. But he did overturn the world’s disregard for the importance of women. God redefines and honors the role of women in history. He lifts up the lowly.

Next, it is Mary’s turn to speak. She bursts into words which are often understood as a song. The theme of her song? *“He has lifted up the humble.”* Just look at her poem. It would be hard to rank yourself and then have everyone watch a video of you doing it. It would be even harder to have the internet watch and have people from all over the world rank how much they favored you. How about rating your favor with God for the whole world to see? How did Mary rank herself? She knew everyone would call her favored and blessed, *“from now on all generations will call me blessed.”* Most of history has been filled with generations acclaiming Mary as one of the most blessed! But she didn’t place herself there. She was lowly, a humble sinner who needed a Savior. God lifted her up. She knew that. *“He has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant.”*

Mary is blessed and favored! But don’t fall into the trap of giving her more honor than Scripture does. Elizabeth honored Mary but didn’t idolize or venerate her. And Mary knew the blessing and favor of God wasn’t hers because of anything she had done. It was because of the mercy of our God who lifts up the lowly. She wanted God and his mercy to remain on the forefront. It is all about him. She said, *“The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”* She never would have intended for people to venerate her name or to say that she has done great things for them. Through faith she was blessed, not through her works. In faith she credited God for everything. She says he *“remembered his mercy.”* Mercy is for the lowly undeserving sinner. God did not lift up Mary because she was so good. He lifted her up in mercy because she couldn’t lift herself up. He responded in mercy to send her a son, a Savior.

Luke’s gospel account describes one far humbler than Mary. He is the one who remains the object of her praise. He is the son of Mary and the Son of God. Elizabeth didn’t just say Mary was blessed. She said, *“blessed is the fruit of your womb.”* That child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. He comes near to us in the flesh and is born as the sinless and holy Son of God. In lowliness he became the Savior of Mary, of Elizabeth, Zechariah, of all Israel and all the world. He came to offer himself as the servant and as the sacrifice for us all. By his lowly death we are set free from death’s curse. He lifts up the sinner from the curse to a position of boundless blessings and eternal life.

And God lifts up the lowly. The same Jesus who died in our place has been lifted up. He now sits in glory. He will rule on his throne forever as our King. So, it doesn’t matter what you think you deserve for a rank. The King looks at everyone in this room and doesn’t look at what you have done. It’s just like Elizabeth says when filled with the Spirit, *“Blessed is she who believed, because the promises spoken to her from the Lord will be fulfilled!”* Do you rank yourself as blessed? Your Lord does. He has shown you his favor and mercy. Believe his promise and be blessed in him!

How would you rank yourself? God calls you blessed through his Son! Like Elizabeth, Mary, and John you have the Holy Spirit. You are not able to lift yourself up. We are all lowly sinners. But we are favored by grace and blessed through faith! The apostle Paul tells us all to *“be filled with the Spirit.”* Be filled with him as you sing and make music in your heart to the Lord and share the good news with others! Lift up the lowly. They are lifted up as you by the Spirit’s working speak of the promises of God. And in a bold and timely way you share the truths of faith: *“God lifts up the lowly! Sinner, he has sent a Savior for you!”* Rejoice with Mary and say, *“My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior... he lifts up the humbled.”*