

# Cultivating and Attaining Humility

by Mack Tomlinson

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*This sermon focuses on the importance of cultivating and attaining humility in the Christian life and within the church. Drawing from Psalms 131, the speaker emphasizes the need to overcome pride, ambition, and intellectual arrogance by consistently choosing humility. The process of quieting oneself, like a weaned child, is highlighted as a daily practice to develop true humility. The exhortation is to place hope solely in the Lord, abandoning self-exaltation and trusting in His guidance and provision.*

**Scripture:** Psalms 131:1, Proverbs 16:18, James 4:10, Philippians 2:3, 1 Peter 5:5, Matthew 18:4, Colossians 3:12

**Topics:** "Humility", "Trust in the Lord"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Well, it's a joy to be back here with you, and I ask you to turn to Psalm 131. I want to speak on something this morning that if this is real in our life, and in the lives of our churches, we will never go wrong. We will not fall into deception.

We will not go astray and apostatize. But this is one of the deepest realities that can ever be produced in a Christian's life and in a church's life. Cultivating and attaining humility.

Cultivating it and attaining it. And you say, well, that sounds strange. Can you attain humility? Well, apparently so, because this psalm says that it's true.

Doesn't mean you perfect it, but the difference is if you're living your life as a pattern, and you're proud, arrogant, unteachable, and then once in a while you humble yourself, and you have a moment of humility, and then you start again. That's not what's in view here. The opposite of what's in view here.

Living a life that's marked by humility. And then when you stumble, and you're proud, you're arrogant, you repent, and humility is engaged again. A lifestyle of cultivating true humility.

I wrote beside this psalm in my morning Bible that I normally read from, I wrote beside this psalm not long ago these words, It takes great grace to have this. So let's read the psalm, and let's let the implications of it sink in, because brethren, every Christian here can have a life of humility. It's attainable.

It's doable by the work of God in our hearts. Psalm 131, Lord, my heart is not haughty. It means proud.

My heart is not proud, nor are my eyes lofty. Neither do I exercise myself, that is, pursue, try to regularly do, neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high or lofty for me. Surely I have behaved, I have taken control of myself, in other words, and quieted myself.

Though the word is I've hushed myself. Self, just be quiet. I have quieted myself as a child that is weaned of its mother.

My soul is even as a weaned child. Let Israel hope in the Lord from henceforth and forever. Let's pray.

Father, this is Your Word. Lord, we ask for Your speaking voice to make it a living Word. We give ourselves to You.

Give us Your Holy Spirit now to speak and to hear and to receive and to be changed for the glory of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Cultivating and attaining humility.

Another title might be the truly humble man. Or another way you could say it is overcoming the proud heart. Overcoming the proud heart.

James Montgomery Boyce said this, it is hard to imagine anyone living with Jesus for a full three years and still wanting to be important himself instead of just letting Jesus be important. But the disciples, even at the last, they hadn't gotten it. He's on His way to Jerusalem and they're arguing about what? Who's going to be the greatest? Being self-important or being someone significant is of zero importance.

But Jesus Christ being supremely important is of infinite importance. That's what this psalm is about. Three verses.

Sixty-one words. The second shortest psalm, which is the shortest? Psalm 117. Two verses.

Psalm 131. Three verses. Spurgeon said Psalm 131 is a short letter that reaches great heights.

And it really does. It's a short, easy psalm to read, but it's a very hard lesson to learn. Going from having a proud heart by nature and by practice and by culture influence and being shaped with human pride, success, be all that you can be, dream your dreams, nothing's impossible, whoever will work hard, the culture drips with self-driven pride.

This psalm is one of the greatest gems in all the psalms, and the irony is it's so small, it's so seemingly insignificant, it's easy to read through the psalms and you quickly read it and you finish it, and as I said earlier this morning, you don't let it be a wake-up call. Who among us can say today, Lord, my heart is not proud? The fact is, many of us can't say that, should not say that, but here's the real amazing thing. Some of you could say it and it would be true, but you'd never say it.

But David says it. Like Moses writing that Moses was the meekest man in the earth. That's a hard one, isn't it? It's a brief personal testimony about something so deep, so transforming in the depth of what it's teaching.

No psalm is more personal than this one. It's a little autobiographical picture of David's heart. Now David, if it is David, and some Old Testament scholars question whether David is actually the author, the best commentators really think that it was him, and certainly when you peruse his whole life and you look at David's life and you look at what faults he had, think about this.

Was pride as a pattern one of them? I would say no, it wasn't. Pride did not mark David's life continually, whereas pride was a besetting sin. No, it didn't.

We'll talk more about that in a minute. But this psalm gives us a glimpse into David's soul of deep experience in genuine freedom from pride and arrogance. If you have had a problem with pride all your life and it's a problem today, this psalm gives you hope that you can be changed from a proud person to a humble saint.

Now, how I wish every preacher and pastor could say what David says here, because many of them are the worst bunch about this. What if every elder, every deacon, every church leader, every Christian lady and Christian man, every young Christian and every church had the reality of what Psalm 131 says? Not proud, not haughty, not lofty eyes, not trying to be what I'm not, being what I am, being a weaned child before the Lord and hoping in Him. What if we all lived that reality? How amazing it would be! Psalm 130, the one before is a psalm of forgiveness.

Psalm 131 is a psalm of humility. Humility, how rare that often is. How important it is.

How essential it is. How beautiful it is. How attractive and how fragrant it is.

Pride stinks, but humility smells beautiful. And if the first one's on you, others smell it. And if the second one's on you, they smell that too.

And it's pleasant. These three verses reveal the blessedness of a man with a meek and a quiet spirit. And actually, this psalm is an Old Testament commentary on Jesus' words.

Blessed are the who? The meek. Blessed are the meek. It's marked by a tone of childlike simplicity.

David's just saying, my heart's not like this. It's not like this. Here's what I've experienced, and I'm like this now.

Israel, hope in the Lord. Childlike simplicity, but the depth of the reality of the experience is profound. When did you answer this question? When did you last say about your Christian life I have become more like a child.

We don't talk like that. We don't even think like that. But didn't Jesus use that picture about greatness? Unless you become, in fact, unless you become like a child, you won't even get in the kingdom.

But he went on and said true greatness, he took up a child. And here, David, the king, the greatest in Israel, says I've become like a weaned child. This is a testimony by David that God has worked in him a consistent, humble heart that is not dominated by pride.

Eyes that are not lofty or haughty or ego-driven. He's not pursuing intellectual arrogance about things that he is not to meddle into. Things that are not to be pursued, that are beyond him, that he's not called to.

He's not pursuing them anymore. A humble man consistently contended to be who he truly is. Would to God, every one of us would be given the grace to be contended with who God made us and not try to be like anybody else.

You talk about getting free. You talk about coming into usefulness. And fruitfulness.

When you become content with who God made you and you don't try to be like anybody else. Genuine, consistent humility. Has this psalm ever become real to you and really gripped you? Have you ever read it and suddenly were stopped and gripped with the power of what David actually says here? It's amazing.

David was truly changed and he was not what verse 1 says about pride. He had come to the place where pride was not ruling his heart. But he was truly stating what is true of him now.

When we really see what he's saying, it's remarkable and it's radical. Because this psalm says there's three things that were not representative of David's life as a general rule. Now was he ever proud at a point? Yeah, it tried to get him and he would overcome it at times.

But there are three things that were not representative of David's life as a general rule. In other words, whatever he was, he was not like this normally. Number one, a proud man.

Number two, an ambitious man. Number three, an intellectually arrogant, high-minded man. He wasn't those things.

Meaning, he didn't try to be like a brainiac or a big shot. That motive was eliminated from his heart. So there's three things to see in verse 1. There's one thing to see in verse 2. And there's one exhortation in verse 3. Let's just work our way through this psalm.

You apply it and may God shape our lives with it by His Spirit. Number one, what David was inwardly. Humble.

Humility. My heart is not proud. My heart is not lifted up.

My eyes are not raised too high. This is completely something of the inner heart. Something inward.

As Psalm 51 says, wisdom in the secret heart. Where no one sees but God and inner heart change. What David actually claims here and affirms under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is that I am now not a proud man in normally living out my life.

Now, if he says that, is he instantly proud? Has he lost his humility? In claiming humility, do you lose it? Apparently not here. Or this wouldn't be in the Bible. And we know that could be the case.

You know, it's normal and it's popular to think if you think you're humble, you're not. And if you say it out loud, well, that's really proud. And if you write it in the Bible forever, you're really proud.

Like the guy who wrote a two-volume autobiography. Number one, Humility and How I Attained It. And then the second volume was The Ten Most Humble People in the World and How I Trained the Other Nine.

Well, you know, that guy's probably proud flaunting his humility. But if a man is truly humble and God has worked that in him, can a Christian see God has humbled him and produced humble dependence in his

heart where he's honest with himself and they see themselves accurately and thank God for humility that is worked in them? Yes, you can. Can we acknowledge it in our lives? Well, David did.

We think to claim humility is to forfeit it, but David with a humble heart says, my heart is not proud. In other words, if pride has been dominant in my past, in my life, it's not now dominant. A change has been brought.

That's not in my heart anymore. If it has filled my heart and my eyes and ambitions in the past, it's not doing that now. Humility was cultivated and became a mark of David's life.

This means this. We're to cultivate it. And we'll talk more about that.

It's not something we don't have responsibility in. It was a reality that David possessed. He was, to use the word, he was unpretentious.

What does that mean? What does it mean to be pretentious or unpretentious? Here's a good definition. Unpretentious means you're not attempting to impress others anymore. With an appearance of importance, talent, knowledge, or spirituality, you're not attempting to impress others with your greatness.

You're unpretentious. You're not trying to portray an image that you're not. You're trying to not make people think more highly of you than they really should.

Being free of motives and desires to impress, to be great, or to be known. In 1996, the British author and preacher Ian Murray came to Texas and he came to my church for five days to do a conference and they stayed in our home and our children were, I don't remember, 10, 8, 6, and 2 of them were 2. I don't remember their age. But anyway, he was there.

First thing he did when he came in our house, he went out in the backyard and he was playing soccer with all of them. Running around, kicking the ball, playing soccer. And I thought, that's reality.

That's humility. He was an example to me. Free of motives and desires to impress anyone.

Now think about it. When you read the Old Testament, when a close reading of David's life shows that his life was not dominated by self-importance and pride. Yes, passions at times.

Anger, impulsiveness at times. But not arrogance and self-importance. It did not dominate his life.

Pride blinds us and then it binds us and puts us in bondage. A proud heart is a heart that was in bondage that won't let you function in humility and even respond rightly. And remember this, it's amazing when you read through the Old Testament, every single time, whether it was Ahab or wicked kings, every time someone humbled themselves before God, God had mercy on them.

He showed them mercy. And every time someone who was proud hardened their heart and wouldn't humble themselves, God judged them every single time. Because He always resists pride and He always gives grace to who? To the humble.

The evidence of David's act of humility. Just stay with me and think about this. You read his life, there was constant evidence that David walked in humility.

Remember, he was a warring king. In fact, he was told, you can't build me a temple because you're a bloody king. So, God didn't let him do that.

But he did not greedily aspire to attack nations and pick fights with other kings. His warring was always defensive. Every time.

Every time he was protecting Israel. And that shows that he was not just in pursuit in his arrogance to try to unnecessarily conquer. He didn't kill Saul when he could have and seize the throne, even after Samuel anointed him.

David waited for God to fulfill his promise to make him king. He didn't scheme or manipulate like Jacob did. And for ten years, he had to run from Saul and did not once raise his hand against him.

That is self-control. That's humility to wait before God. That's being spiritually minded to wait on the Lord and to not take matters into your own hands carnally.

When Shimei came out cursing David, remember? When David was coming out of Jerusalem with his men, Shimei comes throwing dust at him and cursing him. One of David's right hand men said, I'm going to go take his head off. David said, no.

God's letting him curse me. Let him do it. Self-control.

Self-control. When David's bringing the ark back in Jerusalem and Saul's daughter, his wife, Michal, sees him dancing, what does she do? She gets embarrassed. What does David say? Well, I'll be yet more vile.

I'll keep doing it. He was rejoicing before God and he didn't care if people saw him in his dignity, royal dignity, dancing before the Lord with all his might. He would rather rejoice.

He would have quenched the Holy Spirit if he had listened to her to save his royal face and his dignity. He maintained humility. When David in his anger was coming to wipe out wicked Nabal, he gained self-control through Abigail's intercession and he humbled himself to not do what his flesh would have done.

That's humility. I'm not going to do it. In summary, David showed a nobility of humility, willingness to wait on God and not exalt himself.

Now, he had his faults, but those were not self-centeredness and egotism and ambition. H.C. Leupold, the best commentator in my opinion on all the Psalms, if you can ever get his book on the Psalms, it's incredible how good it is. Leupold said this about David, there may have been a time when great plans and ambitions surged through David's heart and drove him down the road of ambition, but he exited that road and he never got on it again.

Some of us need to exit the road of self-ambition and start driving on humility boulevard. David, who can say, Lord, my heart is not proud? David could and it was true. Now secondly, he says this.

Read on. Verse 1, My eyes are not lofty, and I do not exercise myself in great matters or things too high for me. How many of you think I should run for president? Think how people exercise themselves in things too high for them.

Try to get on with some blogger and long discussion and you're going to straighten them all out. David said, first, I don't have a proud heart. Secondly, I don't have lofty eyes or carnal ambition.

That has to do with high-minded conceit to pursue big self-goals and big plans for self-exaltation. I'm going to be somebody for Jesus. Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not, Scripture says.

But see, that's the current view in this world. Let no one tell you that you can't accomplish whatever you can dream. The sky's the limit.

You can be. You should try to be the next Paul Washer, the next LeBron James, the next Texas governor, the next president. Envision it.

Pursue it. Let nothing stop you from your dream that you have. You can live your dream.

You can be your dream. You can have your dream. So says schools and higher education and the media and famous people.

Lofty eyes. David says, I don't have them anymore. My eyes, what I envision, what I want, and what I want to pursue has been mortified, has been changed, has been sanctified.

I'm not trying to be someone important anymore. I'm not trying to accomplish something that God really is not calling me to do. I'm going to be who I am, and I'm going to do what He's called me to do.

That's all that's important. Human, high-minded, intellectual, self-ambition. Be something great.

Accomplish something big. Be famous. Be known.

Be respected. David would no longer aim for fame. But how often, in even Christians' hearts, is there an aim for fame? I'd like to be in a real position.

I'd like to have a ministry. I'd like to be this or do that. And you want to do things out of love for Christ, and you want to be more fruitful, but you see the fine line can become in what the true motives are.

Is it really because God is shaping your life and you see that He's calling you to something and others in the church or in the body of Christ see that and they recognize it? If any man desires the office of an elder, he desires a good thing. But then, look out among you and recognize those that God's hand is on. You see the balance there.

David did not position himself, thrust himself forward for self-greatness. Rather, great position and leadership was thrust upon him by God and the purpose of God. David's here saying, let high ambitions be abandoned.

Let them be gone from our hearts. You and I don't have to be someone that God hasn't made us. And David came to the place.

He said, I don't want to be somebody that God hasn't made me. I don't want to pursue things even that are too lofty and too high for me. Consider the second half of verse 1. I do not exercise myself in great matters or things too high and beyond me.

Now just picture this. A professor from the University of North Texas. I took a class in graduate history of philosophy there at the University of North Texas.

And the class started out with 80. And in about two weeks, there was about 10. And I said, well, I got to stick with it.

I'm going to learn something. So, it was advanced philosophy. History of philosophy.

What if the professor had come to me? He said, Mr. Homeless, I see you're a little older than some of these students. So, I got to be gone tomorrow. Would you do the lecture tomorrow on the philosophy of Spinoza? What do you think I should choose to do? What an opportunity.

Now, what a fool I would be if I did it. I'd be taking on something too high for me, too lofty that I'm not equipped for that I couldn't do it. You have to say no.

I had a friend two weeks ago call me. He's in another church in Denton County. And he said, brother, can I come by? I need you to teach me Revelation chapter 8. Because the pastor is sick and they've asked me to teach the class.

I said, no, I won't do that, brother. Don't do it. Do not do that.

You're not ready. You're not equipped. You're not a teacher.

You don't have what it takes. They shouldn't have put that on you. You would be trying to do what's beyond you, beyond your experience, your ability, your calling, and your giftedness.

Don't do it. And he listened to me. If he had done that, too high, too lofty, beyond him, he would have probably been embarrassed and discouraged a long time in the future.

Exercising myself in great matters or things too high for me. Causing myself to choose to not pursue and go after things that I don't have the goods for intellectually, domestically, business-wise. Living in the armor that God's given me and not trying to put on Saul's armor.

David said, it won't work. Give me myself. I'm slinging my stones in the power of God.

Here's how some have translated this phrase. I do not seek out and try to walk in matters that are too high for me. I do not let proud thoughts and lofty views cause me to try to be or do what's truly beyond me.

Matthew Poole, the commentator, said it this way. It has not been my course to attempt to take on things beyond my capacity, beyond my abilities because of ambition for selfish accomplishment. Edwards said it this way.

I do not have an ambitious heart to try to converse in or function in things where I should not go. Now we must realize it's not sinful to hold an honored position in ministry or public service. But God should put a person there and a person should not seek it.

Let each of us be aware of ambition. It's foolish to meddle in matters and intellectual discussion beyond our capacity and beyond our growth. Self-control, self-discipline, self-humbling are great attainments and must be sought diligently and earnestly.

Blessed is the one who is a weaned child. Someone said great men never think they're great and small men never think they're small. Elisha Cole said it is one of the hardest matters under the sun to become nothing in ourselves.

I wasn't ready to preach for 20 years when I started preaching. And half the time now, I don't even think I'm ready. If one wants to please the devil, let him begin to admire himself.

Well, I've got gifts that they don't have. Why do they get to do that that I'm admiring myself? Let anyone, if he thinks more highly of himself than he ought to think. Now how did this process happen in David? If verse 1-2 is true, that he doesn't have a proud heart, he doesn't have lofty eyes, and he's not trying to exercise himself and things beyond him.

How did this happen? How did he get from A to B? How did he go from pride not being an issue to humility being real in his heart? The process is verse 2. Surely I have behaved and quieted myself. What does he mean? It means he took control of his heart and his thoughts and his mind. He says, calm down, boy.

You're not great. Don't try to be great. He told himself.

He hushed himself. Thoughts would come. Desires would come.

No, that's not right. That's not godly. I'm not going there.

I'm not going to pursue that. I'm not going to put myself forward. I'm going to take the back seat and let him call me up to the front.

I'm not going to take the front seat and ask to be moved back. He calmed himself. He told himself, shut up.

It's okay to tell yourself to shut up. You don't use that word in my house when my wife's around. The grandchildren never say that to one another.

Well, it's okay to tell yourself that. David did that. He calmed himself.

He settled himself down. He evaluated this situation. He knew that this was a battle.

This is picturing a real battle and a real process. It was a possible long conflict where he reduced the temptation of self-exaltation, thinking more highly of himself than he should, and he mortified his thoughts of self-greatness. He stilled his soul.

He took himself by the collar of his heart, and he said, no, I won't go there. I refuse to put myself forward or engage myself in things I shouldn't. It was a weaning process.

I guess now some babies are harder to wean off the breast than others. And so, it's a fight. And it's hard.

But once a baby truly gets weaned, there's contentment to sit in mom's lap and not have to demand it. David said, I am like a weaned child. Contented.

I have no desire to be great. I have no desire to traffic in things I'm not called to. I'll be me and I'll do what God wants me to do.

A contented heart is a blessed thing. Oh, the blessedness of a weaned child of God. Brethren, we've got to learn to wean our hearts from carnal ambition, from pride that tries to get us.

We have to learn to desire only the Lord Jesus and not something great for ourselves. God can entrust great opportunity to those He can trust with those opportunities. So, He weaned Himself.

And then, He says, My soul right now is a weaned, contented heart where these things that were issues aren't in my life anymore. And then He exhorts us. Look at verse 3. The humble man's exhortation to us.

He takes it to the church. He takes his autobiographical, personal, intimate experience, and He applies it pastorally to all of God's people. You know what He says? Hope in the Lord.

Just hope in Him. Hope in the Lord your God. This is an all-inclusive exhortation.

Pride not before God, church. Let all your glory be in Him. Let all your glory be in the cross.

Let all your glory be in what He's done. He gets the credit for everything. Without Him, we can do nothing.

Lofty, selfish ambitions, your goals, your gifts, your ministry, your future, your longings, hope in the Lord. A man's gift makes room for him. It doesn't say a man makes room for his gifts.

A man's gift makes room for him and brings him before kings. Promotion is from who? The Lord. He brings up one.

He puts down another. Hope in the Lord. Everything in the Christian life and in ministry and in fruitfulness and in usefulness and in service and in a life pleasing God, everything is from Him and of Him and through Him and for Him and by Him.

So hope in the Lord alone. I love that old chorus they used to sing. In the Lord, the Lord alone is righteousness and peace.

Well, let me apply this a little bit. Number one, how does this really fit us? What are we to do? Humility must be cultivated by daily choices. Paul said, I die daily.

Humility must be cultivated by daily choices. Regularly, quietly, with wisdom, down in the secret recesses of our heart, saying no to prideful thoughts. Giving no place.

Putting out lofty eyes. Killing high ambitions. Self-exalting goals.

Learning to hush your heart regularly. That's mortifying the flesh. Self-importance stinks.

So don't be smelly to other people because they'll smell it. Humility. Think of this.

Humility is not to be a momentary victory in the midst of a pattern of a projection of a prideful life. Humility is the life that we're normally to be governed by, and pride and ambition ought to be the little speed bumps where we momentarily experience that and then we repent and then we return to a lifestyle of humility. Humility is not to be a once in a while occurrence, but it's to rule in our hearts continually as a reality in the Holy Spirit.

So, we must cultivate this. Let ambitions be abandoned. Let lofty eyes be put out and blinded.

Let high thoughts die. Be a weaned child because David was. Number two, we must continually cultivate within our church an atmosphere and a culture of church humility.

I often think about this about our church in Denton. Does our church have any appearance to the community, to others, to those who visit? Does our church have any appearance of superiority or pride? Do we give off any aroma of arrogance? Do we relate to the lost in our evangelism with kindness, humility, listening and caring, or harshly, judgmentally, argumentatively? We are a city set on a hill. It cannot be hidden.

So, what's being seen and heard? What's sounding forth from us? Humility or superiority? What shines forth? How is our church known? What are we known for among the world around us? And when you think about this, beloved, think about this, the Lord Jesus, He is the supreme example of Psalm 131. As a man, He was not proud. He didn't have lofty eyes.

He could have fed. He could have cured hunger and poverty in the country totally. He could have healed everybody with a word.

But He didn't exercise Himself in things the Father had not called Him to. He was on a mission, a singular mission, to do what the Father had called Him to do and to accomplish His work. And think about this, He was willing to be ignorant in His humanity.

Was the Lord Jesus ignorant in His humanity? Yes, He was. Self-imposed choice of being ignorant about things in His humanity. He said, I don't know the day or the hour of My coming.

And you know what governed that? One consideration. Even so, Father, it seemed good in Your sight. So, the Lord Jesus Christ emulates for us in His life and death and His example and in His headship of the church, His being our great High Priest and our Savior, He evidences Psalm 131 to us and He calls us and says, hey, I want you to have no pride in your heart.

I don't want you to have lofty eyes. I don't want you to be about not what you're not supposed to be about. I want you to be a weaned child on My breast.

Hope in Me, Israel. Hope in Me. Hope in Me.

Cultivate and attain true humility. Go for it. You can do it.

It's life in the Spirit. It's our inheritance. What a blessedness if someone can look at your life or mine in the future and they can read Psalm 131 and they can say, hey, that's not just David.

That's her. That's Him. You want that.

Blessed be God. The reality, God can work it in our hearts. Never again read quickly past Psalm 131 without stopping and saying, Lord, am I more this way than I was last week? My heart is not proud.

My eyes aren't lofty. Make me a weaned child. Let's pray.

Father, work in us a heart that is not proud. Remove from us lofty eyes. Remove from us the tendency and temptation to exercise ourselves in matters that are too high for us.

Help us to quiet ourselves as a child that is weaned of its mother. Cause our soul and our life, Lord, to be a weaned child and cause us increasingly to just hope in the Lord. Oh God, work these realities in us that we would be more and more like our Savior.

Hear us, we ask, and work in us to will and to do of Your good pleasure. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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