Wealth and prestige tend to be the favorite things of most people; after all, wealth brings, if not happiness, at least (apparent) security and comfort. And prestige brings influence and admiration. Of course, many go way overboard in seeking these things—often criminally, whether the actions are legal or not. One might remember the Gospel parable (Luke 16) of poor Lazarus, in which the rich man apparently just stepped over the starving and ailing Lazarus, who was lying at his gate. If not legally criminal, that's certainly morally criminal.

Now, in the Sunday Catholic Mass Gospel for July 9th this year, Jesus prays to the Father: “...although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to little ones.”

Jesus is not condemning intellectual ability or education here; in fact, education is praised in scripture. “To a sensible man education is like a golden ornament, and like a bracelet on the right arm.” (Sirach 21:21) Rather, Jesus is condemning intellectual pride and excessive reliance in one's perception of self-sufficiency ... in particular in rejecting God simply because our inevitable human inability to understand how He works in the world. Besides, we're hardly self-sufficient in our day; we need only remember the panic at the threat of a toilet paper shortage during the COVID pandemic. As far as understanding “fate,” we remember the prophet Isaiah: “...my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Of course, it is beneficial to seek understanding of God—in fact, it is the highest of human activity—but we can never go beyond scratching the surface. As the analogy, no matter how high we count on a number line, we're still infinitely away from its end. Likewise, we can be the most intelligent in all the world, but unless we approach God with a humble heart in faith, true wisdom remains elusive. Any teacher can testify that the student who thinks he already knows all is the most difficult to teach.

There is a saying: “The strength of the Christian is found in weakness.” And yet our whole culture seems to rebel against that type of humility. We are constantly barraged with the propaganda that money and power, and fame—those perennial idols of humanity—are what lead to fulfillment. But with those come great responsibility for which we will be accountable to God. They are simultaneously gifts and traps—gifts to the wise but traps to the selfish and those with self-absorbed ambition. At the end of earthly life, the Christian believes he goes before God, and the “talents” which he had been given condemn if not used well—for love and devotion to God, and for love of neighbor.

Yes, the world often sees meekness and humility as simplicity, foolishness, and weakness and despises them. But to provide us the model to follow, Jesus offered Himself for humanity through His humility, not coming in royal magnificence but rather as a humble workman whose “strength” was a trace of greatness—something unfathomable to a world that worships power and wealth.

Jesus was humble so that the humble could/can come to Him ... attracting the lonely, the forgotten, the poor—those despised by the world. And he chooses such persons to perpetuate His teaching. We need only remember how He chose the comparatively lowly apostles—fishermen, workmen, tax collectors, etc.—rather than the Pharisee experts on religion. As St. Paul wrote: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world...to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29) Jesus sought the humble, and only those seeking humility can truly come to Him.

Throughout the centuries, some of the greatest saints are those who have changed history with nothing more than their humble faith and charity. We might remember St. Francis of Assisi, who lived in extreme poverty yet started a radical renewal of Christianity. Or St. Therese of Lisieux, an unknown little Carmelite nun whose “Little Way” of love and humility spread throughout the world. And he chooses such persons to perpetuate God’s will throughout the ages who had a simple, humble faith and devotion to God, an unknown unknown for love of neighbor.

Jesus, St. Francis so wisely reminds us: “What we are in the eyes of God is what we are...and nothing more.”