

# The humility of Christmas

(Luke 2:1-14)

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When we recount the story of Christmas, it is amazing the humility with which the Jesus arrived in our world.

The holy, Son of God, left His throne to come to us. That *“although He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men”* (Philippians 2:6-7).

God did not choose a queen from a powerful, famous, wealthy empire to be the mother of Jesus. Instead God chose a simple teenage girl from the town of Nazareth, a farming village, which only had 120-150 inhabitants. For many it would have been the last place that they would have looked to find the promised Messiah. This is confirmed in John 1:46, where Nathanael is told that *“they have found the One about whom the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth.”* Nathanael responds, *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”*

We then see that Jesus is to be raised by Joseph, the husband of Mary, who is a simple carpenter. Not a prince, a warrior or even a priest, but a simple carpenter.

Jesus then comes as a baby. Babies are helpless, dependent, messy and uneducated, and yet that was the form which Christ took. And to make the humility even greater, this Christ child is not born in a palace, but in a manger, a feeding trough, which was likely surrounded by farm animals and all the filth and the smells that come with them.

It is surprising that the story should tell that the first announcement of God came to some shepherds. Shepherds were looked down upon by the religious people of the day. They were quite unable to keep the details of the religious ceremonial law. They could not observe all the meticulous religious hand-washings and rules and regulations. Their flocks made far too constant demands on them. Because of this, the religious elite of their day looked down on the shepherds as uneducated, sinful and unclean. It was to these simple men of the fields that the angels came.

In this divine humility we find that God's ways are so much different than ours. His priorities and methods seem like foolishness to our world, but in the reality of God are expressions of wisdom. The Christmas story is so unexpected. For many who come from other religions, they hear it the first time and think that surely God would not act like this, but yet He does.

This humility, which keeps us off balance and not sure what to expect, continues throughout the life of Jesus. To the woman caught in adultery, we expect the holy wrath of God, but instead, Jesus tells those who are standing ready to stone her, *"that whoever is without sin can cast the first stone."* To the leper, whose disease is contagious and often fatal, Jesus draws near and heals the man by actually touching him, when a spoken word would have sufficed. When the rich young ruler comes to Jesus seeking heaven, any lesser teacher would have been flattered that a man of such status and resources might join his team, but instead Jesus reveals the idol of the rich young ruler's heart, and in response the rich young ruler sadly walks away.

Jesus never wrote a book. Never held an official synagogue position. He never owned property or gathered wealth. He had no degrees from a prestigious seminary or held any political office. By the end of his ministry, after his ascension, there were only 120 followers that were gathered in the upper room waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. By most standards, his beginning in the manger was humble, and His death and what seemed to be the end of His movement was even more humbling. But that was not so.

We know the outcome. His intense investment in the lives of twelve disciples, and his ministry to many more has resulted in eternal results that outshine any king, emperor, organization or religious guru that the world has ever seen. As Christ continues to live in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit hearts are changed, forgiveness is granted and lives are transformed. The Gospel continues to be preached to nations around the world.

All of this began with the divine humility found in the manger that first Christmas morning, and was continued by the divine humility that refused to call the legions of angels that could have, in the blink of an eye, prevented Christ's arrest, torture and crucifixion. We, too, are called to this same humility.

In the words of the apostle Paul:

*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. 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. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*  
(Philippians 2:3-11)

Humility was not just a character trait of Jesus; it was seen throughout the scriptures in the lives of those who walked with God. In Numbers 12:3 we read, *“Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.”* It is incredible that Moses would have been humble. He had received the best education in the world in the palace in Egypt. He had spoken face-to-face with Pharaoh multiple times. He had been used of God as God brought the supernatural plagues against Egypt. He had led several million Israelite slaves out of captivity in Egypt. He had touched the Red Sea with his staff and seen it part so that the Israelites could cross on dry ground. He had received directly from God the stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments. Exodus 33:11 even tells us that, *“The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”*

Maybe that was the reason that Moses was humble. He had drawn near to God and seen the comparison. He knew how great God was and how weak he was. He knew that He received no credit for all that had happened. He knew that God was sovereign and almighty. He knew that without God he was nothing more than a murderer who had been caring for sheep in the wilderness the last 40 years of his life.

Humility came from knowing that anything and everything that He had been a part of was all due to God and nothing of his own doing. The result was humility.

We see the same in John the Baptist. Jesus would describe him as greater than any of the prophets who had come before him. John served God greatly, but he knew his role. He was the forerunner of Christ who was to prepare the way for Christ’s coming. Like a herald who used to arrive in a village to proclaim that the king would be coming soon, so John had come to merely prepare the way for the King’s coming. A king’s herald would never claim glory for himself, and neither should we. In John 3:26-28, 30, we read:

*And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

John knew that his role was to prepare the way for Christ and he realized that even that role was a gift from heaven. He had been chosen before he was born. It was all a work of God. He had earned nothing of what he had done or any acclaim that he had received. This realization formed humility in John’s life.

We, too, can claim no credit for who we are or what we have achieved. Some will argue that they deserve all the credit because they have worked hard to earn what they have attained, but is the glory really theirs? If they are willing to go back to the scriptures, they will find that God is the giver of all good gifts (James 1:17). We can take no credit for the mind that we have; for the health that we have; for the abilities that we have; for the opportunities that we have; for any money or position that we have. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, *“What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”*

We do not deserve the breaths that we breathe or each beat of our hearts. God formed us in our mother's wombs. He knew the days of our lives before we were born (Psalm 139). God who has drawn us out of sin and darkness and granted us life, He has drawn us to Himself (John 6:44). It is He who works in us to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose (Philippians 2:13). As we seek Him first, He meets our needs (Matthew 6:33). In our weakness He is strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). He alone deserves all glory. It is these truths that draw us out of pride and nurture a heart of humility within us.

Our relationship with pride and humility will greatly affect our relationship with God. Proverbs 16:5 declares that, *"Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord; be assured, he will not go unpunished."* In stark contrast, Jesus says in Matthew 5:3, *"Blessed are the poor in the spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* This tension is summed up by 1 Peter 5:5, *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* Those who are aware of their spiritual poverty and need for God are greeted by God with open arms. One sure way to set God's heart against you is to walk in arrogance and pride. Proverbs 8:13 tells us that God hates pride.

In Mark 7:20-23, Jesus lists thirteen characteristics that come from one's heart and defiles the person. In this list we find pride listed beside sexual immorality, murder, and adultery. Pride is self-seeking, self-righteous, self-glorifying and sinful. It hinders one's drawing near to God as one thinks too much of himself and too little of God.

Pride has consequences. Proverbs 16:18-19 tells us that, *"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud."*

Psalm 10:4 talks of how in his pride the wicked do not seek God or even have room for God in their thoughts. When a Christian is proud it often expresses itself in bragging, self-righteousness, judgment of others and thinking that we really have no need for God. Some will be drawn to legalism and weak prayer lives. We may say we believe in the power of prayer and our need for God, but functionally we live godlessly, relying on our own abilities and seeking glory for any achievements that may come our way. We seek our own will and our own agenda as if our lives belong to us, when in reality we belong to Christ.

A prideful Christian is often unaware of the sins in his or her life and very aware of the sins of others. It is very likely that Jesus' instructions to *"take note of the plank in one's own eye before pointing out the speck"* in another's eye is being totally ignored (Matthew 7). As we ask the Spirit to reveal sins in our hearts we are humbled and forgiven. As we confess the sin in our lives we then are prepared to truly appreciate the grace that we find in Christ. We are then prepared to give this same grace to others.

Some will try to defend pride as confidence, self-confidence and self-reliance, but pride is different than these. Pride's greatest offense is that it seeks to rob God of the glory that is rightfully His. We seek recognition and credit, seeking to make an idol of self and little of God. Satan was cast out of heaven for this very same reason (Isaiah 14:12-15). He had the audacity to seek God's glory and in the end he will lose everything.

Pride has kept many people from salvation. They have sought to come to Christ on their own merits, with their own intelligence and on their own terms, but salvation will never be received this way.

Salvation itself relies on the humility of heart. Salvation requires a dying to self. It is admitting one's spiritual bankruptcy and guilt. It is no longer relying on one's self, but putting faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. It is humbling one's self before God and turning from one's sin.

That is the first humility in a Christian's life, but not the last. The growth of a Christian hinges on a continued, day-by-day, humility and dependence on Christ.

We begin to understand humility in the words of Paul: *"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude"* (1 Corinthians 13:4).

The apostle Paul continued in his letter to the church in Philippi: *"Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves"* (Philippians 2:3). Jesus adds in Luke 14:1, *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

This is one of the keys to a life of humility as a Christian. There will often be times that Christ calls us to humility. We will desire the way of pride, but we must trust in the fact that as we humble ourselves before Christ and others that in the end He will lift us up.

1 Peter 5:4-6, makes this clear, *"When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory . . . Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you."* Jesus illustrated this point in Luke 14:7-11:

*Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

When seeking to grow in humility we must realize that humility is God's will for our lives, and for many of us He is already leading us through a process to grow greater humility in our lives. One example of God taking initiative is found in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. In these verses Paul is talking about a "thorn in the flesh" from which he was suffering:

*So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of*

*Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Our natural tendency is to cling to pride and resist humility, but like Paul, God at times will bring circumstances to humble us and remind us of our need for Him. Take note of Paul's circumstances. He was a faithful servant of God who was passing through a difficult time. He prayed for relief, but none came. The thorn in the flesh was brought by a messenger of Satan, while at the same time it served a godly purpose. Because of the great revelations that Paul had received, it was likely to bring pride, so God in His grace to Paul did not relieve the "thorn in the flesh", but instead provided the grace that would be needed to endure.

At times God will allow suffering in our lives to protect us from pride. In these moments, will we walk in humility, receive what He has sovereignly ordained for us, and trust the hand of a loving God?

In John 13:1-17, we find one of the clearest pictures of humility in scripture. Jesus is gathering with His 12 disciples for the last supper in the upper room. They had just finished arguing about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom, and then these verses occurred: Jesus, the holy Son of God, gets up from the table. He lays aside his outer garments, takes a towel and ties it around His waist. He then pours water into a basin and washes the disciples' feet. He then wipes off the feet with the towel that was wrapped around him. He then calls His disciples to follow His example and live the same way.

This is one of our clearest calls to humility, but if we are not careful we miss a key detail of the story. In verse 3, before Jesus got up and gathered the towel and the water it said this, *"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, <sup>4</sup>rose from supper."* This is the crucial detail of the story. His act of service was the natural overflow of His conscience awareness of His relationship with God the Father. He knew the Father and He was rightly related to Him. He knew His role and the purpose that lie before Him. With this in mind it stirred in Him a heart of humility that served others.

The same is true for us. When we are rightly related with God it will nurture a heart of humility within us. A daily rehearsal of the gospel keeps us aware of our sin and desperate need for Christ. This awareness of sin gives us a fuller appreciation for God's grace. In Christ we are humbled and secure. We no longer need to please the world, stretch the truth or bring glory to ourselves. We no longer have to promote our image or defend our reputation. We live with a grateful heart and a dependent mindset. We realize that all we have has been given to us. As our needs are met in Christ, we no longer need to depend on the world to hold us up and meet our needs. Our needs are met in Christ, so we are now free to serve others.

If you are seeking to evaluate the level of your own pride, here are some questions to consider: Do you have an awareness of sin in your life? Do you apologize easily? Do you receive criticism or critique well? Do you serve others frequently? Do you serve others anonymously? Do you brag when you do something well? Do you talk about yourself a lot? Do you gossip? Do you get offended easily when someone treats you worse than you think you deserve? Are you open to other people's perspectives, or only yours? Do you blame others when things don't go well? Are you comfortable talking about your

weaknesses? Are you judgmental of others or overly critical? Do you find joy in correcting others? Do you submit to God's will, or are you following your own agenda and plans? Do you pray often, or just trust in yourself to meet your own needs? If you fail at something, how quickly do you recover? Do you get angry with God when He does not answer prayer the way that you want? Do you feel insecure, or are you walking securely in the love of Christ?

Today, ask God to make you humble. Receive difficulties as a tool that God can use to refine you. Apologize when needed. Begin to check your motives to why you do what you do. Intentionally serve others. Review how God has worked in your life in the past. Be thankful for all that God has given you. Draw nearer to God through prayer, confession and daily scripture reading. Ask God to reveal pride that is in your heart. Trust Him to refine you and make you humble.