

Humility: The essential characteristic of the Christian life

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Proverbs 3:34 – “Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.”

Micah 6:8 – “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Luke 14:10 – “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Proverbs 11:2 – “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.”

Proverbs 15:33 – “Wisdom’s instruction is to fear the LORD, and humility comes before honor.”

Psalms 25:9 – “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.”

Psalms 149:4 – “For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory.”

Romans 12:3 – “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”

Romans 12:16 – “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”

Philippians 2:3-4 – “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

Matthew 23:11-12 – “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Pride is often present in the heart of man. It seems a natural fit as the world pursues image, power, and success. But when we look at the Bible, we see that God desires something totally different for those who follow Christ. In the book of James we are called to humility. This is essential if one is to draw near to Christ.

James 4:6-8,10 tells us that, *“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you . . .¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”*

Author W.W. Wiersbe tells how this phrase *“submit yourselves to God”* was a military phrase that meant “get into your proper rank”¹. Literally, “know your place”. When a private acts like a colonel, or a captain like a general there will be problems.

In the same way when we, as children of God, want to be the lord of our own lives, or take the credit for things that God has brought to pass in our lives, or think too highly of ourselves, pride has taken root. At this point our spiritual growth will be brought to a halt and the soil of our hearts will not bear fruit.

In the words of Andrew Murray:

“Humility is the only soil in which the graces root; (since our dependence on God is the source of our deliverance) the lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure. Humility is not so much a grace or virtue along with others; it is the root of all, because it alone takes the right attitude before God, and allows Him as God to do all.”²

A good example of one who lacked this humility before God is found in Luke 18:9-14:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In Barclay’s commentary, it reads: *“Only when a man realizes his own ignorance will he ask for God’s guidance. Only when a man realizes his own poverty in the things that matter will he pray for the riches of God’s grace. Only when a man realizes his weakness in necessary things will he come to draw upon God’s strength. Only when a man realizes his own sin will he realize his need of a Saviour and of God’s forgiveness.”*

Jesus is our ultimate example of humility. As we read in Philippians 2, Jesus Christ, who was divine, left His place in heaven, took on the form of a man, and came to earth. But that was not all. He willingly laid down His life on the cross. He counted Himself amongst those who were cursed by being killed on a tree (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). For our sake God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 369). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Andrew Murray, *Humility: The Journey Toward Holiness*.

Humility not only characterized Christ in His death, it also was the way that He lived His life. We see it in His humble birth in a manger. We see it as He took time for unappreciated children, as He touched the unclean leper, as He spoke to the sinful Samaritan woman, as he ate with tax collectors and called uneducated, normal men, to be His disciples.

Jesus never pursued man's accolades, reputation or political power. Even though He had the authority to call a legion of angels to save Him, and a crowd that at one time wanted to make Him King, Jesus still chose the way of washing feet and loving the unlovable. He came to seek and save the lost. He was the lamb who came to take away the sins of the world. Although He was God, He walked in humility.

We see the importance of humility in the Apostle Paul's life as well. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, we read how, to keep Paul from becoming conceited or prideful because of the revelations that he had received from God, a *"thorn of the flesh"* was given him. It appears to have been some sort of physical sickness or discomfort.

Paul prayed for it to be removed three times, but it was not. Instead, to ensure that Paul continued in humility, God provided the strength that would be needed to endure. Here we see the essential role that humility played in Paul's life as God continued to advance His kingdom through Paul's life.

Even at the peak of Paul's missionary work, when it would have been easy to become proud, Paul still considered himself the *"least of the apostles"* and the *"chief of sinners"* (1 Timothy 1:15; 1 Corinthians 15:9).

In Paul's writings to the church in Corinth, we see another truth that helped Paul walk in humility: *"What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"* (1 Corinthians 4:7)

Paul knew that all he had was a gift from God. This truth brought him low in worship as He lifted high the name of Jesus.

Humility is not just admirable, it is essential if we are to walk rightly with God.

When we lack humility, and instead are carried along by pride, we think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We become self-sufficient, self-righteous, over-bearing, easily offended and defensive, because we must protect our position. Life becomes a competition where we seek to make ourselves look better and others look worse. We compare ourselves to others, resulting in pride, instead of seeing ourselves in the light of God, which results in humility.

We appear strong, when we are fragile and insecure. We build our identity and worth on unstable ground and live with fear that our self-made castle will be torn down by another. We wear a mask, fearing that others will find out about our imperfections.

That is a godless way to live. As Christians we don't need the mask anymore. That is a relic of the past. As Christians we all have confessed our sin and our need for Christ's redemption. We have been forgiven and are now fully known and fully loved. We have been brought low by the conviction of the Spirit and raised up to walk in newness of life. We can now live in the reality of our imperfections, because our house is built upon the rock of grace.

Pride no longer serves any purpose in our lives. Christ is now our confidence and the exalter of all who walk in humility. It is the Gospel that ushers us into true humility and the riches of the Christian life.

In our moments of pride, when we are wronged, in our hearts we cry out, "I deserve better!" But do we? How can we act the part of the righteous judge? Have we not sinned against a holy God? Do we not deserve eternal condemnation? Can we even claim to deserve the simplest beat of our hearts or the breath that we just breathed? In Christ, have we not already been blessed beyond anything that we could ask or imagine? Humility remembers that it all is an undeserved gift and responds to difficulties and even difficult people with a grateful heart.

Yes, there will be times that we need to stand up for what is right, but even in the midst of taking a stand or calling for justice, we should speak from a heart of humility that remembers that only God is good and that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

If we are children of God, then humility is God's will for our lives. That leaves us with two options: We either humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord, or He will do it for us. Examples of this are John the Baptist and King Nebuchadnezzar.

In John 3, we see the humility of John the Baptist. Once Jesus began His public ministry, the crowds began to follow Jesus more than John. When John was asked about this, he told of how his role was to prepare the way for the Christ and that his joy was now complete. Speaking of Jesus, John said, **"He must increase, but I must decrease."** No pride. No fighting for position or popularity. John willingly humbled himself because he knew his place, who he was and whom he served.

We see the opposite in the life of King Nebuchadnezzar. God took Him through various experiences to show the king the greatness of God, and yet the king did not humble himself. In the end God took away his sanity for seven years. The king **"ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws"** (Daniel 4:33). Only then did the king humble himself, lift up his eyes to heaven, and **"blessed the Most High . . . who lives forever"**.

We see this same working of humility in the lives of David, King Hezekiah, Peter and even Moses, who was used by God in miraculous ways but of whom it was still said, **"He was more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth"** (Numbers 12:3).

For those who seek humility and desire to join with God in the process, here are some practical ideas.

As you go through your day, check your heart and your motives. Why do you do what you do? Why do you say what you say? Whose glory are you living for, yours or God's? Whose opinion do you care more about, people's or God's? When you do good deeds, are you seeking the praise of man, or seeking to do them anonymously so that no one knows? Who are you comparing yourself to, people or God?

When we walk in humility it releases the pressure to perform and compete. We rest in the love of Christ and are free to enjoy the day that we have been given.

One helpful prayer to pray is that of Psalm 139:23-24:

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! ²⁴And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

The prideful person will see no need for this prayer; the humble will gladly embrace it.

Another way to join God in the process of being made humble is to intentionally put yourself in positions of humility. Volunteer to serve others. Avoid the spotlight. Do the tasks that no one else wants to do. Work behind the scenes. Avoid bragging or gossip, which are ways of lifting yourself up and putting others down. Take time alone with God to confess sin. Become better at apologizing. Seek God's help in prayer and His wisdom in Bible reading. All of these are intentional ways to put yourself in the posture of humility. We even see an example of this from Jesus, in Luke 14:

⁷Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸“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, ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Intentionally choose the position and posture of humility. In it you will find peace and freedom, also remembering that God will exalt those who humble themselves.

Another point worth mentioning in the world today is that of social media. It so easily becomes a platform for us to brag, boast and exaggerate for our glory, while hiding our faults. Whether it is showing off our vacation, our night out on the town, the beautiful people we hangout with, or our latest greatest accomplishment. It can even be used to “humbly” share with all our followers our most recent “act of service”. Beware of every false humility. It is such a temptation to make much of ourselves on social media. Be careful. Social media can be used for God's glory, but few do it in a way that makes much of God and little of themselves. For some, a time away from social media may be required as one seeks to grow in humility and remove pride from their lives. As this posture of humility becomes a habit, pray that God will make it the condition of your heart.

Tim Keller, a pastor in Manhattan, New York, said that in 1970 a Sunday school teacher changed his life with a simple illustration.

The teacher said, “Let's assume the distance between the earth and the sun (150 million kilometers) was reduced to the thickness of this sheet of paper. If that is the case, then the distance between the earth and the next nearest star would be a stack of papers 21 meters high. And the diameter of the galaxy would be a stack of papers 500 kilometers high.”

Then Keller's teacher added, “The galaxy is just a speck of dust in the universe, yet Jesus holds the universe together by the word of his power.”

Finally, the teacher asked her students, “Now, is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your assistant?” No, He must be your everything.

In the presence of God, who rules over the entire universe, humility is one’s only option. To stand out under the countless stars on a dark night, and still think greatly of one’s self is unthinkable. Pride has no place in the presence of God. For one to be a Christian and at the same time walk in pride is an indicator of their lack of intimacy with Christ.

As we grow to know God better His holiness will convict us of sin. His strength will reveal our weakness. His wisdom will expose our ignorance. At the same time, He will heal our brokenness. He will provide for our needs. He will love us unconditionally. He will be our security and our peace. He will be our everything, and our response to this Savior, who draws near, will be humility. When we see Him clearly we will be humbled completely.

We see an example of this in Isaiah 6:1-8. Isaiah tells of seeing the Lord *“sitting upon His throne”*. He tells of the train of God’s robe filling the temple and speaks of Seraphim, angels who stood above God, calling out to one another, *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”* Isaiah went on to tell how *“the thresholds shook at the voice of Him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.”*

Isaiah then told of his response, *“And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”* God then asked, *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* and Isaiah, in brokenness and awe responded, *“Here am I, send me.”*

May we draw near to Jesus and join with Isaiah in utter humility and unending service to our King.

In closing, may we fix our eyes on Christ, our ultimate example of humility, as we read these words from Philippians 2:3-11:

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Discussion questions:

1. What from this sermon did you find most interesting?
2. When you think of the word pride, what type of behavior comes to mind?

3. When you think of humility, what type of behavior comes to mind?
4. Why is humility so important in the Christian life?
5. How does the gospel of Jesus Christ help us be humble?
6. What do you think God wants you to do in response to this sermon?
7. How can we pray for you?