

Humility

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

If we were to ask passers-by on the sidewalk, “What is sin?” We might hear any or all of the following: “What Hitler did.” “Murder, lying and stealing.” “How my brother-in-law lives.” Someone who’s thoughtful might say, “Lust, envy and greed.” A savvy church-goer might say “Coveting,” or maybe even, “Coming short of the glory of God.” The problem with all these answers is they don’t reflect anyone’s personal experience. They come from head knowledge, not real life as we actually live it. And that’s probably because hardly anyone anymore has the personal awareness of sin. If someone were aware of sin in his life, he’d answer, “Selfishness,” which is a 100% true answer. Equally true would be “Pride,” but few who are proud are even aware of it.

To be in the company of people who are conceited is positively painful. Such people are ugly. They want – nay, *demand* – attention from others. They want to be celebrated as the most intelligent, or the most talented, or the most knowledgeable, or the most important, or the most spiritual person in the room. With supreme self-confidence they think highly of themselves and, as a corollary, they think critically if not contemptuously of others. Proud people are always right, and those who don’t agree with them not only are wrong but must be evil for refusing to recognize them to be right. When with such people, we want to scream, “A little humility, please!” Or at least, “Be silent!” Pride is ugly.

To some degree, pride resides in every one of us. It is, after all, one of the main components of our sin nature, constantly amplified by society’s influences or more directly by demonic influences. If a matter at issue is enveloped in mystery or is unknowable, the proud person nevertheless fills the air with bombast and prideful speculation. Our era is saturated with such speculation. And the extent of pride in humanity is no surprise. The Serpent’s strategic temptation in the Garden was pride, “You shall be like God” (Genesis 3:5). But the Serpent lied: to be like God is to be humble or gentle. Instead humanity became like the Serpent, proud, violent, self-seeking liars. Pride, in all the self-exalting ways it expresses itself, fully characterizes the personal lives of unbelievers. And it’s sadly still evident even in mature believers. People who are proud can’t praise or worship God because they’re too occupied with themselves. That’s why the Bible treats pride with severity, because it prevents us from knowing God.

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1-4). The stereotype here (for the sake of the lesson) is that children are innocent – or at least, being aware how dependent they are, they are necessarily humble; they haven’t yet developed the fierce pride that characterized those who confronted Jesus. The lesson probably reprised Isaiah’s text in which the Lord declared, **“This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word”** (Isaiah 66:2b). This text needs to be imprinted in our souls. Other key texts include Deut. 8:2, Micah 6:8, Isaiah 57:15, and 2 Chron 7:14. Humility is needed to be in God’s presence.

The only appropriate response to an awareness of God is humility. And with it, necessarily, a sense of our own fallibility. We are, after all, dependent creatures. We are finite and mortal, and we are sinful. The awareness of God and of His perfections and beauty means we are aware of our own ugliness before Him. So we constantly desire to be more humble and more holy, so that we can be increasingly aware of God in our lives. It’s why we’ve been called, to know Him and to be with Him. The proud person can never have more than the most superficial awareness of God; he *cannot* go any deeper into what Christians are called to experience.

Christ himself is our model of humility. Although He had a name above every name (He was the deity of the O.T.), He humbled himself in the incarnation and took on human nature, willingly becoming a servant of God who worked with his hands, and then became obedient to death, even the agonizing and humiliating death of a cross, in order to effect salvation and blessing for sinners (Philippians 2:6-11.) One of the most precious characteristics of Christ is His humility. Think foot washing! In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit of Christ, and in that list is “gentleness,” which can be equally correctly translated as humble-ness. In your Bible, substitute “humble” for “gentle” in Matthew 11:29 and 21:5, and in 2 Cor 10:1, . To be Christ-like, or to be a spiritual person, is to be humble.

Humility is something that has to reside deep in the soul to control our thinking and our desires. It’s an attribute that cannot be imitated by unbelievers. Nor can it be pretended; it’s real or it’s not there. And let’s be totally clear on this: Humility is not weakness. But it does eschew any display of force or power-seeking. The leaders of the Jewish nation correctly perceived Jesus to be gentle and humble, so they concluded He couldn’t possibly be their Messiah, whose

flashing sword, they hoped, would throw the Romans out of Judea. Here's why humility is so exceedingly important: The humble person trusts God, who with infinite wisdom judges circumstances and people, to know the truth of a situation and, in His time, to vindicate the humble person and set all things right. Humility is a powerful expression of faith in God. The humble person willingly—gladly!—bases his life on the Word of God instead of listening to himself or to others.

Humility is needed for salvation. Without humility, there can be no repentance. Nor submission to the Gospel. Nor obedience. Nor love of others. And I don't see how it's possible for anyone to experience peace and contentment without humility. Showing grace expresses humility. Forgiving others expresses humility. Experiencing the joy of one's salvation demands humility.

And desiring relationships with other believers, including some who may be inferior in some way, requires humility. Jesus gave us a commandment to love one another with His kind of love so that there's unity among believers, and this is so important that John says it's a test of salvation (John 13:34 and 1 John 3:14, 23, 24). But this simply can't happen unless we have humility. Scripture therefore has much to say about humility in relationships. Let's sample a few texts:

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves...Share with God's people who are in need...Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” (Romans 12:10-16). **“Agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought”** (1 Corinth 1:10). **“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others”** (1 Corinth 10:24). **“Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love”** (Galatians 5:13). **“Be completely humble...be patient, bearing with one another in love”** (Ephesians 4:2). **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you...Be imitators of God...and live a life of love”** (Ephesians 4:32-5:2). **“In humility consider others better than yourselves”** (Philippians 2:3).

We need this Sunday School lesson on humility because humility is so easy to ignore. We think having information about the Bible is important, more head knowledge, but we neglect the sanctification of our own souls. Paul's command to transform our thinking (Romans 12:2) is largely lost. Humility comes from wisdom (James 3:13), it comes from reflecting deeply on our finitude and sinfulness and on God's transcendence and holiness. And it comes by yielding to the Spirit.

The humble man knows he's unworthy to approach God. He knows he deserves to be condemned. The humble person is aware that God is the standard of righteousness, and he knows that he falls short. He also knows God is going to one day judge him. So his only hope is mercy. He not only confesses his sinfulness, he pleads for mercy. Because of the cross, God shows mercy to humble people, to those who know they're sinners.

Pride is the basis of all evil. It rejects God's authority. It substitutes our own creaturely authority for God's authority. It substitutes our own wisdom for God's wisdom. Pride is self-love. That means there's no sacrificial, giving type of love for others, and so relationships are impossible. Pride and love of others are antithetical (see 1 Corinth 13:4). There can only be power struggles when pride is involved. The proud person typically also is self-righteous. Self-righteousness is really self-love. Pride glorifies self. Because it comes from Satan, it defies God and His intent to bless us. Pride also repudiates truth, because in truth we're finite and mortal and we have no legitimate basis for being proud. Thus pride is also a monstrous self-deception. Yet . . .

Our churches today are saturated with people just like the Pharisees of ancient times, self-righteous and proud, full of themselves. Scant love for anyone else, mainly themselves. The proud person may not even be looking for a relationship with God. He's simply exalting himself, showing off – if to no one but himself. The humble person, in contrast, cares about God. He fears God. He trusts God. He wants a relationship with God, but he knows he can't have it because of his sins. So in pleading for mercy, he's also asking for a deep relationship with the living God.

A theme of reversals is introduced by Mary in Luke 1:50-53 and repeated later (Luke 14:11 and 18:14): It's the humble person who God exalts. Not the proud. God knows our heart. He has a radically different set of values than we do, and it's God's judgment that counts, not ours; we need to bring our thinking into line with His values.

Our sin nature *must* be dealt with. God did that at the cross, so that “good” (such as humility) can come to us from outside us, by the indwelling Spirit of the risen Christ. But we have to work at this. **“Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time”** (1 Peter 5:6; also James 4:10). So I beg you, dear reader, to think deeply about humility. Not because it's a desirable value or concept, which of course it is, but so that it becomes *your defining characteristic*, what you *are*. Because it is that important.