

The Most Important Christian Virtue

by Forrest C. Gilmore

Introduction

When Abraham was interceding to the Lord on behalf of Sodom he said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes" ([Gen. 18:27](#)). When Jacob was afraid that Esau was about to attack him, he prayed, "I am unworthy of all the loving-kindness and of all the faithfulness which Thou hast shown to Thy servant" ([Gen. 32:10](#)). When God commanded Moses to go before Pharaoh and demand the release of the Israelites, Moses replied, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" ([Ex. 3:11](#)). In a similar way Gideon responded to God's call to deliver His people from Midian: "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house" ([Judg. 6:15](#)).

John the Baptist could not conceive of his baptizing Christ. "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" ([Matt. 3:14](#)). The previous day John had told the crowds, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" ([John 1:26–27](#)). Even self-confident Peter, after witnessing the miracle of the great catch of fish, "fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!' " ([Luke 5:8](#)). Paul served the Lord "with all humility" ([Acts 20:19](#)), acknowledging that "we are [not] adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" ([2 Cor. 3:5](#)) and considering himself to be "the very least of all saints" ([Eph. 3:8](#)). God's choice people have always been humble people.

Definition

Freedom from pride and arrogance; humbleness of mind; a modest estimate of one's own worth; act of submission. (Noah Webster 1828)

In the Catholic Encyclopedia, Humility is defined as, "A quality by which a person considering his own defects has an humble opinion of himself and willingly submits himself to God and to others for God's sake." [Cath. Encyclopedia]

Humility or humbleness is a quality of being courteously respectful of others. It is the opposite of aggressiveness, arrogance, boastfulness, and vanity. Rather than, "Me first," humility allows us to say, "No, you first, my friend." Humility is the quality that lets us go more than halfway to meet the needs and demands of others.

Humility as a virtue is a major theme of both the Old and New Testaments. Why do qualities such as courtesy, patience and deference have such a prominent place in the Bible? It is because a demeanor of humility is exactly what is needed to live in peace and harmony with all persons. Humility dissipates anger and heals old wounds. Humility allows us to see the dignity and worth of all God's people. Humility distinguishes the wise leader from the arrogant power-seeker. <http://www.twopaths.com/humility.htm>

A Simplistic View

It is generally considered more pleasant to be humble, as being boastful or obnoxious may have the natural consequence of annoying others. This may be why humility is considered a virtuous state of being.

"True humility" is distinctly different from "false humility". [citation needed] "False humility" consists of deprecating one's own sanctity, gifts, talents, and accomplishments for the sake of receiving praise or adulation from others.

Most philosophies have some teachings on humility. In the interest of time, I will not cover this topic.

Examples in Scripture

When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom. (NAS, Proverbs 11:2)

It is better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud. (NAS, Proverbs 16:19)

Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life. (NIV, Proverbs 22:4)

"Everyone that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord". (Proverbs 16:5)

Remember the story of Naaman in First Kings. Only when Naaman was willing to swallow his pride and wash 7 times in the muddy Jordan was his leprosy cured.

Ahab - "And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days. In the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house." (1 Kings 21:27-28)

In the Book of Daniel we read:

"Nebuchadnezzar The king spoke, saying, 'Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?'

"While the word was still in the king's mouth, a voice fell from heaven: "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you! "(Daniel 7:28-32)

God humbles Nebuchadnezzar, so that he can know that no king is able to rule except by the sovereign permission of Almighty God.

In dealing with problems in the church at Corinth, Paul spoke of the wrong emphasis being placed on certain special abilities. Some touted their abilities; others were envious. Envy is also frequently petulant and pouting. If it cannot have its own way it takes its marbles and goes home, and will not play with the others. That is what some of the immature believers at Corinth were doing. In seeming humility, they said, "I don't have a spiritual gift, so I am not really a part of the church," or "My gift is second-rate and unimportant. I have nothing to offer, so why participate?" But that attitude does not reflect humility. It is self-centered, selfish, and an affront to God's wisdom and love.

Ro. 12:3, "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think..."

1 Cor 10:24 *Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.*

A pastor, after preaching on this passage, asked the congregation to share experiences of giving up something for the sake of someone else. Except for one man who said he did not drink or smoke around other Christians, no one responded. After the service a number of people told the pastor, "For the first time in my life I realized that I don't really give up anything for the sake of others."

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6).

Amongst the benefits of humility described in the Bible are honor, wisdom, eternal life, unity, rewards in heaven and others. In the Bible, an exhortation to humility is found in Philippians 2:1-17:

³ *Let nothing be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it His possession to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross.

Finally, consider how Peter was changed from the impetuous fisherman into a most humble servant of Christ, and listen to this advice to Christians of his day, in 1 Peter 5:5-6 --

...all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for 'God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble'. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God..."

The Central Virtue of Jesus Christ

"Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus: who emptied Himself; taking the form of a servant; and humbled Himself; becoming obedient even unto death. "Phil. 2: 5.

"Our one need is to study and know and trust the life that has been revealed in Christ as the life that is now ours, and waits for our consent to gain possession and mastery of our whole being.

"In this view it is of inconceivable importance that we should have right thoughts of what Christ is, of what really constitutes Him the Christ, and specially of what may be counted His chief characteristic, the root and essence of all His character as our Redeemer. There can be but one answer: it is His humility. What is the incarnation but His heavenly humility, His emptying Himself and becoming man? What is His life on earth but humility; His taking the

form of a servant? And what is His atonement but humility? "He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death." And what is His ascension and His glory, but humility exalted to the throne and crowned with glory? "He humbled Himself, therefore God highly exalted Him." In heaven, where He was with the Father, in His birth, in His life, in His death, in His sitting on the throne, it is all, it is nothing but humility. Christ is the humility of God embodied in human nature; the Eternal Love humbling itself, clothing itself in the garb of meekness and gentleness, to win and serve and save us. As the love and condescension of God makes Him the benefactor and helper and servant of all, so Jesus of necessity was the Incarnate Humility. And so He is still in the midst of the throne, the meek and lowly Lamb of God." (1)

Jesus is Our Example

Here are just a few examples of what Jesus said about Himself:

"I am in the midst of you as he that serveth." Luke 22: 27.

"He that humbleth him: shall be exalted." As it is written, "He humbled Himself, therefore God highly exalted Him."

"The Son can do nothing of Himself" (John 5: 19).

"I can of My own self do nothing; My judgment is just, because I seek not Mine own will" (John 5: 30).

"I receive not glory from men" (John 5: 41).

"I am come not to do Mine own will" (John 6:38).

"My teaching is not Mine" (John 7:16)

"The words that I say, I speak not from Myself" (John 14: 10).

John 10:11- *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.* The shepherds of Jesus' day would lie down at night in the opening to the sheepfold. Any predator would literally have to go over the shepherd's body to get to the sheep. The life of discipleship is the life of servanthood, and the life of servanthood is the life of humility—a life that so intimidates the world that it stands in danger of death.

"These words open to us the deepest roots of Christ's life and work. They tell us how it was that the Almighty God was able to work His mighty redemptive work through Him. (1)

"Here we have the root and nature of true humility. It is because this is not understood or sought after, that our humility is so superficial and so feeble. We must learn of Jesus, how He is meek and lowly of heart. He teaches us where true humility takes its rise and finds its strength—in the knowledge that it is God who worketh all in all, that our place is to yield to Him in perfect resignation and dependence, in full consent to be and to do nothing of ourselves. This is the life Christ came to reveal and to impart - a life to God that came through death to sin and self. The root of all virtue and grace, of all faith and acceptable worship, is that we know that we have nothing but what we receive, and bow in deepest humility to wait upon God for it."

"Is it any wonder that the Christian life is so often feeble and fruitless, when the very root of the Christ life is neglected, is unknown? Is it any wonder that the joy of salvation is so little felt, when that in which Christ found it and brings it, is so little sought? (2)

Jesus Teaches Humility

And [Jesus] called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (NAS, Matthew 18:2-4)

"Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant, even as the Son of Man came to server." Matt. 10:27.

"We have seen humility in the life of Christ, as He laid open His heart to us: let us listen to His teaching. There we shall hear how He speaks of it, and how far He expects men, and specially His disciples, to be humble as He was.

1. Look at the commencement of His ministry. In the Beatitudes with which the Sermon on the Mount opens, He speaks: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth." The very first words of His proclamation of the kingdom of heaven reveal the open gate through which alone we enter. The poor, who have nothing in themselves, to them the kingdom comes. The meek, who seek nothing in themselves, theirs the earth shall be. The blessings of heaven and earth are for the lowly. For the heavenly and the earthly life, humility is the secret of blessing.

2. "Learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest for your souls." (Mt. 11:29) Jesus offers Himself as Teacher. Meekness (gentleness) and lowliness the one thing He offers us; in it we shall find perfect rest of soul. Humility is to be a salvation.

3. The disciples had been disputing who would be the greatest in the kingdom, and had agreed to ask the Master (Luke 9:46; Matt. 18:3). He set a child in their midst and said, "Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, shall be exalted." "Who the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" The question is indeed a far-reaching one. What will be the chief distinction in the heavenly kingdom? The answer, none but Jesus would have given. The chief glory of heaven, the true heavenly-mindedness, the chief of the graces, is humility. "He that is least among you, the same shall be great."

4. The sons of Zebedee had asked Jesus to sit on His right and left, the highest place in the kingdom. Jesus said it was not His to give, but the Father's, who would give it to those for whom it was prepared. They must not look or ask for it. Their thought must be of the cup and the baptism of humiliation. And then He added, "Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant. Even as the Son of Man came to serve." Humility, as it is the mark of Christ the heavenly, will be the one standard of glory in heaven: the lowliest is the nearest to God. The primacy in the Church is promised to the humblest.

5. In the creature, humility is the one thing needed to allow God's holiness to dwell in him and shine through him. After the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Christ spoke again (Luke 18: 14), "Everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." In the temple and presence and worship of God, everything is worthless that is not pervaded by deep, true humility towards God and men.

"The chief mark of counterfeit holiness is its lack of humility. Every seeker after holiness needs to be on his guard, lest unconsciously what was begun in the spirit be perfected in the flesh, and pride creep in where its presence is least expected." (Murray)

6. Even as they sat at their last meal with Jesus, the disciples still disputed who should be greatest (Luke 22:26). Jesus said, "He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. I am among you as he that serveth." , Jesus then demonstrated the attitude they were to have by washing their feet. Could you imagine sitting before the very Son of God as He washes your dirty, smelly feet? Jesus said to them, "I give you this example..." The path in which Jesus walked, and which He opened up for us, the power and spirit in which He wrought our salvation, and to which He saves us, is ever the humility that makes us the servant of all. The authority of command, and example, every thought, either of obedience or conformity, make humility the first and most essential element of discipleship."

The call to humility comes from God Himself --

"Pride is that attitude of self-worship which causes a man or woman, a boy or a girl to think more highly of him or herself than he or she ought. It was well expressed in the Frank Sinatra song, "I Did it My Way"."

Psalm 138:6 says, "Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off." He knows them from afar, and that is where He keeps them. You cannot maintain an attitude of pride and be close to the Lord.

The Most Important Christian Virtue

Now, I wish to argue that humility is the most important virtue of a true Christian.

But you might argue that faith is more important. For example, Eph. 2:8 states, "by grace are you saved, through faith..." and the verse that states, "without faith, it is impossible to please God."

I would have you think about this: It is only when we come to the realization that we have sinned, that God is right and we are wrong, that God is greater than we are; it is only when we swallow our pride in ourself or our humanity, that we are able to place our faith in God. So only the faith that comes out of an attitude of humility is saving faith.

Andrew Murray said this: "... faith and humility are at root, one, and we never can have more of true faith than we have of true humility." In his words, a saving faith is an humble faith.

Some scholars distinguish between the faith needed for salvation and the faith one exercises in their daily living. I feel that, in actuality, these are facets of the one faith we have when we place their faith, our trust, in God. We are all aware of the marvelous chapter of 1 Cor. 13, where Paul speaks of faith and love. Paul says in verse 2, "*though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*"

Paul says that the love of which he speaks is greater than faith, for without that love, faith is nothing.

Later in that same chapter, Paul describes love with these words, *4 Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Here, Paul is speaking of a special kind of love. We know it as *aga'pe'* love. This is the kind of love where the welfare of others comes first. The kind of love that causes us to seek the best for those around us.

I don't wish to wrangle about words, but I would suggest that what Paul is describing here is also humility. You might look at it like this: love is the feeling, perhaps the action; humility is the attitude, the state of mind.

In verse 13, Paul concludes,

13 And now abides faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Thus, Paul, in my estimation, and in the opinion of many others, argues that humility is the greatest human virtue.

Andrew Murray, the great South African preacher of the late 1800's, said this: [One critical failing of the Church is that] "It has so little taught its sons that the humility of Christ is the first of the virtues, the best of all the graces and powers of the Spirit. It has so little proved that a Christlike humility is what it, like Christ, places and preaches first, and what is in every deed needed, and possible too."

Augustine put it this way: *Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion, I should reply that the first, second, and third thing therein is humility.*

Martin Luther said this: "The Holy Scriptures require an humble reader who shows reverence and fear toward the Word of God and constantly says, 'Teach me, teach me, teach me!' The Spirit resists the proud. Though they study diligently and some preach Christ purely for a time, nevertheless, God excludes them from the church if they're proud." Here, I'm sure he's recalling Scripture - "*pride goeth before a fall.*"

Luther also said: *God created the world out of nothing, and so long as we are nothing, He can make something out of us.*

This echoes what Jesus said in John 15:5 - "*Apart from me, you can do nothing.*"

Jesus also spoke of this failing in the people of His day: "*How can your belief be sincere, when you seek glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?*"-John 5: 44.

William Law said it this way: "We need to know two things: 1. That our salvation consists wholly in being saved from ourselves, or that which we are by nature; 2. That in the whole nature of things, nothing could be this salvation or saviour to us but such a humility of God as is beyond all expression.

Listen to Murray again: "It is only by the indwelling of Christ in His divine humility that we become truly humble. We have our pride from another, from Adam; we must have our humility from Another too. Pride is ours, and rules in us with such terrible power, because it is ourself, our very nature. Humility must be ours in the same way; it must be our very self, our very nature. As natural and easy as it has been to be proud, it must be, it will be, to be humble. The lives of each of the Apostles, and the epistles of James and Peter and John bear witness that all was changed [through their encounter with Christ], and that the spirit of the meek and suffering Jesus had indeed possession of them." (Murray)

The simplicity of the gospel and the humility of faithful believers is incomprehensible to the world; it seems to be abject foolishness. The Lord planned it that way. 1 Cor. 1:29 - **God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and ... has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong; God has chosen the base things of the world and the despised, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are.** It is interesting to note that **the despised** means, in the root form, "to be considered as nothing." The Greek is in the perfect tense here, indicating that what was once despised will continue to be despised. So people who were thought to be nobodies in society would continue to be thought of as nobodies. (McArthur)

The world measures greatness by many standards. At the top are intelligence, wealth, prestige, and position—things which God has determined to put at the bottom. God reveals the greatness of His power by demonstrating that it is the world's nobodies that are His somebodies. (McArthur)

Again, hear the words of Andrew Murray: "... our thoughts and words and feelings concerning our fellowmen are His test of our humility towards Him, and that our humility before Him is the only power that can enable us to be always humble with our fellow-men. Our humility must be the life of Christ, the Lamb of God, within us."

In Romans chapter 7, Paul confesses his personal struggle against self-will. Beginning in verse 21,

21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good..... 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God —[I am delivered] through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The level of spiritual insight, brokenness, contrition, and humility that characterize the person depicted in [Romans 7](#) are marks of a spiritual and mature believer, who before God has no trust in his own goodness and achievements. (McArthur)

The Apostle James said, "Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls." (James 1:21)

James is saying it is wonderful to be receptive to the Word—to hear with approval and agreement—but that is not enough. We must receive it as those who would be doers. Non-doers are not true believers. (McArthur) But to be a true Doer, we must be an *humble* doer.

As I said earlier, Humility and love are difficult to separate. But it is the attitude of humility that causes our love to be without hypocrisy and self-focus. Most often, we express love to someone because of what we get in response, be it good feelings, or something else. Or we love someone because of what they have already done for us. However, when we truly love, from an attitude of humility, we express a feeling and mental attrition that we actually have nothing to offer -- we simply give ourselves openly and fully, with no expectation of anything. When we are truly humble, we simply give what we have, and it is perceived as love. When we give anonymously, truly never wanting any recognition, we give with an attitude of humility.

It is in our relation to one another, in our treatment of one another, that the true lowliness of mind and the heart of humility are to be seen. Our humility before God has no value, but as it prepares us to reveal the humility of Jesus to our fellow-men. (Murray)

It is when we face temptations that humility offers the most fruit in our lives. "The humble man feels no jealousy or envy. He can praise God when others are preferred and blessed before him. He can bear to hear others praised and himself forgotten, because in God's presence he has learned to say with Paul, "I am nothing." He has received the spirit of Jesus, who pleased not Himself, and sought not His own honor, as the spirit of his life." (Murray)

Henry Adams said: *After all, man knows very little, and may some day learn enough of his own ignorance to fall down and pray.*

Conclusion

"Humility, then, is more than just a virtue: it is a form of perception, a language in which the "I" is silent so that I can hear the "Thou", the unspoken call beneath human speech, the Divine whisper within all that moves, the voice of otherness that calls me to redeem its loneliness with the touch of love. Humility is what opens us to the world.

And does it matter that it no longer fits the confines of our age? The truth is that moral beauty, like music, always moves those who can hear beneath the noise. Virtues may be out of fashion, but they are never out of date. The things that call attention to themselves are never interesting for long, which is why our attention span grows shorter by the year. Humility -- the polar opposite of "advertisements for myself" -- never fails to leave its afterglow. We know when we have been in the presence of someone in whom the Divine presence breathes. We feel affirmed, enlarged, and with good reason. For we have met someone who, not taking himself or herself seriously at all, has shown us what it is to take with utmost seriousness that which is not I." (2)

"It is when the truth of an indwelling Christ takes the place it claims in the experience of believers, that the Church will put on her beautiful garments and humility be seen in her teachers and members as the beauty of holiness."
(Murray)

Thus, my friends, I commend to you the mindset of humility. The mindset that knows that without Christ, without love that is grounded in humility, we are nothing.

(1) Andrew Murray (1895) - <http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/murray/5f00.0565/5f00.0565.c.htm>

(2) Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks is Chief Rabbi of Great Britain)

(3) <http://www.christian-faith.com/forjesus/pride-vs-humility>