

JULY 2003—*Humility*

Augustine of Hippo said that, for those who would learn God's ways, humility is the first thing, the second thing and the third thing. Eleven hundred years later, Martin Luther, when asked to name the three greatest virtues replied, "First, humility; second, humility and third, humility." These are but two of the many great leaders who have stressed the importance of humility in the believer's life.

What is humility? Surprisingly, it is not a poor self-image, nor a denial of one's gifts, abilities and accomplishments. C.S. Lewis describes humility not as having a low opinion of one's talents and character but rather as self forgetfulness.¹ This entails a radical honesty with ourselves about ourselves that begins to free us from the denials, pretences, and false images with which we deceive ourselves. Thus, John Wesley could describe humility as "...a right judgment of ourselves which cleanses our minds from those high conceits of our own perfections, from the undue opinions of our own abilities and attainments...."²

Paul calls us to this honesty when he says "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... (Ro. 12.3). In other words, sober realism about who we are, what we are, and from Whom our gifts and abilities ultimately come is essential to developing humility. This comes as we invite the Holy Spirit, working through the Holy Scriptures, to search and illuminate truth and apply it to our hearts and minds. As we begin to come to terms with ourselves, good and bad, strengths and weaknesses, we can move beyond preoccupation with self to loving care and concern for our neighbor.

How do we live in humility in the rough and tumble of daily life? Paul helps us when he says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2.3-4). Paul then urges us to imitate Christ's example of servanthood. As we serve our neighbors in love, we will find ourselves growing in the humility of Christ—which lies at the heart of a truly spiritual life.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name...

Philippians 2:5-9 NIV

¹ *The Screwtape Letters*, McMillian, p. 63.

² sermon on "The Circumcision of the Heart," I:2