



FROM HERE TO HUMILITY
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Pride, Humility & God — by **John Stott**

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A neglected but indispensable ingredient of Christian spirituality is humility. As Richard Baxter put it, "humility is not a mere ornament of a Christian, but an essential part of the new creature."¹ Indeed, perhaps at no point does the gospel come into more violent collision with the world than in its insistence on humility as the paramount virtue. The wisdom of the world despises humility. Western culture has been greatly influenced, often unconsciously, by the power-philosophy of Nietzsche, who envisaged the emergence of "a daring and ruler race." His hero was the *Übermensch*, tough, brash, masculine and overbearing, who would become a "lord of the earth." But if the ideal of Nietzsche was the superman, the ideal of Jesus was the little child. There is no possibility of finding a compromise between these alternative models; we are obliged to choose.

PRIDE, then, is more than the first of the seven deadly sins; it is itself the essence of all sin. For it is the stubborn refusal to let God be God, with the corresponding ambition to take his place. It is the attempt to dethrone God and enthrone ourselves. Sin is self-deification. But God says that, since he is God and he alone, he will not share his glory with any other (e.g., Isa 42:8, 48:11).

HUMILITY, then, is not a synonym for hypocrisy, pretending to be other than we are. The real hypocrisy is pride, the pretense that we can manage without God or rival God. Humility is honesty, acknowledging the truth about ourselves, that as creatures we depend on our Creator's power and as sinners on our Savior's grace. Only God depends for himself on himself. His eternal self-dependence is the ultimate reality in which humility rejoices and against which pride rebels.

So it is that **GOD** works, and announces his intention to work, in order that people will come to acknowledge that he is God.

The most notable examples in Scripture relate to Israel's exodus from Egypt and the restoration from Babylon. In both instances God acts, ultimately, for the sake of his holy name. Of course, whenever human beings act in order to impress people with who they are, their behavior is regarded as exhibitionist and reprehensible. How then can we accept that God acts in order to gain recognition for himself? Our answer begins with the reminder that it is always perilous to argue by analogy, and doubly so when the analogy assumes that God (infinite and all-holy) can be compared with human beings (finite and fallen). For example, "jealousy," "wrath," and "vengeance," which in human beings are condemned as sinful, are attributed to God in Scripture because he is God and because in him these reactions to evil are perfect, free from all taint of evil themselves.

Similarly, it is because Yahweh is the only God and Savior, and there is no other, that he desires — even requires — every knee to bow to him (Isa 45:22-23). Worship is due to him; it

is not due to us.

It is also because he alone is God, that pride (the attempt to dethrone him) is such a heinous offense, and that humility (doing obeisance before his throne) is essentially good and beautiful. Hence too the biblical epigram, enunciated often in the Old Testament and endorsed in the New, that God "abases the proud and exalts the humble." This fundamental divine principle runs clean counter to conventional wisdom, which insists that to succeed we must exalt ourselves, whereas if we humble ourselves, we will fail. But Jesus calls us to a radical re-evaluation, as a result of which we live by his values and repudiate the self-centered values of the world.

In his public teaching, Jesus commended humility as the preeminent trait of the citizens of God's kingdom, describing it as the humility of a child.

'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' (Mt 18:2-4).

That is, not only is greatness in the kingdom measured by humility, but even entry into the kingdom is impossible without it.

Because children are seldom humble in either character or conduct, Jesus must have been alluding to their humility of status, not behavior. Children are rightly called "dependents." For what they know, they depend on what they've been taught. For what they have, they depend on what they've been given.

In our thinking we are to be adults, not children, putting our God-given intellectual powers to their fullest use (1Co 14:20). Nevertheless, in the process of learning we are to be like children. Jesus thanked his Father that he had "hidden these things from the wise and learned" and had instead "revealed them to little children" (Mt 11:25). Jesus was not rejecting wisdom and learning in themselves, but pride of intellect and trust in autonomous reason. He was advocating neither ignorance nor irrationality, but humility before God's self-revelation in Christ. Christian humility begins with an open-minded readiness to listen to God and submit to his revelation. "If anyone ... does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing"(1Ti 6:3-4). By contrast, the person who is "humble and contrite in spirit" is the one who "trembles" at God's word (Isa 66:2; cf. Ezr 9:4; 2Ki 22:19; Da 10:11).

Childlike humility is to be expressed not only in an open mind (the way we learn what is taught to us), but also in an open hand (the way we receive what is offered to us). Jesus stressed this in relation to the kingdom: "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Mk 10:15). In other words, the kingdom (a synonym for salvation) is a free gift to be received; no merit can earn it, or even contribute to it.

The humility of dependence thus lies at the root of evangelical faith. What God has said through Christ and done through Christ — the fullness of his word and deed, his revelation and redemption, both of which were finished in Christ — are now offered to us freely, and are to be received humbly as by a little child.

In fact, at every stage of our Christian development, and in every sphere of Christian

discipleship, pride is our greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend. This is so in justification, sanctification, and ministry.

Justification and Humility

The central gospel truth of justification by grace through faith was not Paul's innovation, for Jesus had taught it plainly in his parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee relied for his acceptance on fasting, tithing, and righteous living. The tax collector, however, "would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" This man, rather than the other, Jesus concluded, "went home justified before God." "For" (here is the double epigram) "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:9-14). Thus, merit and mercy are the only possible alternatives as objects of our faith. But to trust in our own merit is to court rejection; to trust in God's mercy is to find acceptance.

The gospel begins by insisting that we deserve nothing at God's hand except judgment; self-salvation is impossible. The "scandal" (i.e., stumbling block) of the Cross is precisely that it undermines our self-righteousness and deprives us of all grounds for boasting. It tells us that we have no merit to plead, no gift to offer, no excuse to make. Our proud human heart would do almost anything to retain at least a modicum of self-respect, but the gospel brings us to the ultimate humiliation of being declared bankrupt and stripped naked.

Sanctification and Humility


The same double epigram, which Jesus applied to justification, James went on to apply to sanctification, although in slightly different words: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (Jas 4:6, quoting Pr 3:34). Again, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (Jas 4:10). The context of this summons is the temptation to be a friend of the world and so an enemy of God. James is clear that God's grace is amply sufficient to enable us to live a godly life and to keep ourselves "from being polluted by the world" (Jas 1:27). But God gives his grace only to the humble, who admit their dependence on it. If, therefore, we hope for his grace to lift us up to holiness, we must "humble [ourselves] before the Lord" (Jas 4:10).

Ministry and Humility

Peter quotes the same proverb, but applies it to service (1Pe 5:5). He goes on to write of "God's mighty hand," the symbol of his power in creating the universe (e.g., Isa 48:13), redeeming Israel from Egyptian bondage (e.g., Ex 13:9), and raising Jesus from the dead (Eph 1:19-21). If we want to be exalted by God's mighty hand, and used in his service, we must first humble ourselves under it.

In all three examples — justification, sanctification, and ministry — the same principle applies. The mighty hand of God can lift us up, to acceptance, holiness, and usefulness, but only if we abase ourselves under it. In brief, the only way up is down. Chrysostom is one of the church fathers who regularly referred to the beauty of a humble spirit and the ugliness of pride. "Nothing is like humility," he said: "this is mother, and root and nurse, and foundation, and bond of all good things: without this we are abominable, and execrable, and polluted."² "How ... can a man extinguish pride?", he asked. "By knowing God. For ... if we know him, all pride is banished."³ With this we are back where we began. Pride is primarily an offense against God, a rejection of his sovereignty, a trespass into forbidden territory. Only when God is given the honor due to him does human arrogance wither away and die.

Michael Ramsey went further. In one of his ordination charges given while Archbishop of Canterbury, he offered some wise and practical advice on how to grow in humility, with which we may fully close:

First, thank God, often and always.... Thank God, carefully and wonderingly, for your continuing privileges and for every experience of his goodness. Thankfulness is a soil in which pride does not easily grow. Secondly, take care about confession of your sins.... Be sure to criticize yourself in God's presence: that is your self-examination. And, put yourself under the divine criticism: that is your confession.... Thirdly, be ready to accept humiliations. They can hurt terribly, but they help you to be humble. There can be the trivial humiliations. Accept them. There can be the bigger humiliations.... All these can be so many chances to be a little nearer to our humble and crucified Lord.... Fourthly, do not worry about status ... there is only one status that our Lord bids us to be concerned with, and that is the status of proximity to himself.... Fifthly, use your sense of humor. Laugh about things, laugh at the absurdities of life, laugh about yourself, and about your own absurdity. We are all of us infinitesimally small and ludicrous creatures within God's universe. You have to be serious, but never be solemn, because if you are solemn about anything there is the risk of becoming solemn about yourself.⁴ 

Notes:

1. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (London: Epworth, 1950) p.99.
2. Chrysostom, *The Acts, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 30, P. Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 11.192.
3. Chrysostom, *2 Thessalonians*, *ibid.*, 13.379.
4. Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* (London: SPCK, 1972) pp.79-81.

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