

Special Section: Humility

Haughty Or Humble?

How you relate to others is the true test of your humility

By Howard Baker

First John teaches that the proof of our love is in our actions. First Peter states that the proof of our faith is in our response to trials. In what arena is our humility proved? In our daily relationships with the people around us.

The Apostle John questions how a person can love God, whom he can't see, if he doesn't love the brother he can see. My question is, "Have I truly humbled myself before the God I can't see if I do not humble myself before the people I can see?" The invisible, heart quality of humility before God renders it, for the most part, unverifiable. But if I really want to know the condition of my heart, I need only look at my relationships.

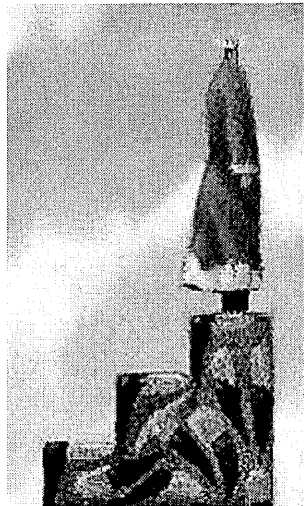


Illustration by Greg Hally

Recognizing the Enemy

The tempter, who himself was seduced by pride, came to Jesus in the wilderness and appealed to His human inclinations and desires. In his powerful little book *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen describes these appeals by Satan as the temptation to be relevant, the temptation to be powerful, and the temptation to be spectacular. Though Jesus refused to succumb to the enemy's attractive offers, the rest of us have not fared so well. The chief reason is that we fail to recognize these subtle forms of pride. As Eugene Peterson observes, "It is difficult to recognize pride as a sin when it is held up on every side as a virtue, urged as profitable, and rewarded as an achievement."

But when we turn to the relational dimension of our lives, pride is much easier to spot. If we

ask ourselves the questions that the Bible asks about our relationships, our pride surfaces like soured milk poured into a cup of coffee.

Before we go further, remember that the first step to humility is the awareness of pride. Let's not despair as we examine the many facets of this sin in our lives. Rather, let's welcome new awareness of pride as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

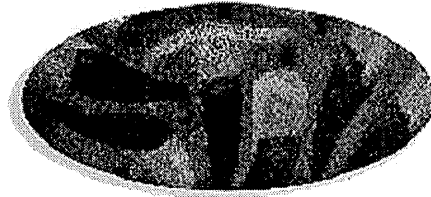


Illustration by Greg Hally

Am I a servant of all?

After a display of pride by some of His disciples, Jesus reminded them, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (see Mark 10:35–45).

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster wisely makes the distinction between “choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant.” Choosing to serve allows me to stay comfortably in charge. I decide when, where, and whom I will serve. This kind of service can actually produce pride rather than humility, as the focus remains on what is good for me. On the other hand, when I choose to be a servant, I have placed myself “on call” to the needs of others.

Most of my working life I have been in the position of choosing to serve. The exception was a two-year stint as chaplain in a homeless shelter. Each day I would show up at work having no idea what lay ahead. I was simply there to serve whomever entered the door. One day it was a single mother needing rent money so she wouldn't be evicted that afternoon. Later, a runaway teenager asked me to help him buy a bus ticket for his trip home. Next, an elderly homeless man needed someone to listen to his story. Every person was unique in personality and situation but very much alike in needing someone to care. That is what a servant does: care about the needs of others.

In Mark 10:51 Jesus demonstrates the humble demeanor of the servant when He asks blind Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” Unlike Jesus, I frequently presume to know what people need and base my serving on the agenda I set for them. I may think I am serving my wife by doing household chores when what she really needs is relaxed conversation over a cup of coffee. “How can I help you?” is the constant question of the humble servant. Imagine the impact this simple question would have on our children, our employers, our neighbors, and our friends. They may even begin to see Jesus, as Bartimaeus did.

Do I associate with the lowly?

“Do not be proud,” Paul wrote, “but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Romans 12:16).

James flatly states that if you show partiality, you are committing sin (see James 2:1–9). In that situation the partiality was based on the appearance of wealth. One person came to church dressed in fine clothes and jewelry and was given a seat of honor. A poor person came in and was told to stand in the back. James said that showing this kind of personal favoritism arises out of evil motives.

While I was in seminary, one of my professors called attention to how our institution showed preference for the rich and powerful by giving them a seat on the platform during chapel. Both personally and corporately we must examine our motives and practices in this regard if we are serious about being clothed in humility toward one another.

Jesus' humility led Him to become the "friend of tax collectors and sinners," as well as prostitutes, thieves, and other outcasts. The glance and stance of Jesus was always toward the poor and the powerless. He practiced downward mobility. He gravitated toward those who desperately needed Him. In light of Jesus' example, we must ask ourselves, "Who are my friends?"

The Colorado Prayer Luncheon is an event that attracts the wealthy, powerful, and famous in our community. Though not in any of those categories, I was invited to attend by a neighbor. As I walked into the convention center, I ran into a friend of mine who had a street person with him. My friend told me later that he'd been given an extra ticket, and he thought it would be fitting to invite someone who needed a good meal. He chose to associate with the lowly. I thought to myself, "That is what Jesus would have done."

Do I consider others more important than myself?

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3). A self-centered life is not a Christian life. Yet the subtleties of pride creep in disguised as angels of light. I am told to be goal-oriented so I can be "highly effective." I am encouraged to be "significant" for God. I am sure you can add to this list other "responsibilities" of the "faithful" Christian. The fallacy in all of the "doing" is that I become the center rather than Christ. How can I consider others more important than myself when I have so much to do to get my act together? I can't.

That's why a key to learning this aspect of humility is trust in God's provision. If He will meet all my needs, including my need to be transformed into His likeness, then I can focus less on doing and more on being, less on myself and more on others.

There was a young man with cerebral palsy who incarnated this truth to me. I was on the staff of a Young Life camp in the mountains of Colorado, and Steve was on the work crew. The rugged terrain made it very difficult for him to get around, yet I never heard him complain, and he always greeted me with a smile. One of our staff had been troubled by a toothache and made no secret of it for several days. After he returned from the dentist, Steve approached him with sincere concern and compassion and inquired about the tooth. The staff member was stopped in his tracks. He realized that a minor toothache had caused him to be totally self-centered. In contrast, Steve had entrusted his lifelong debilitating illness to God, leaving him free to demonstrate true concern for others.

When I trust my loving Father to care for my needs, I am free to consider others more important than myself.

Am I willing to take the lower place?

In the parable of Luke 14:7-11, the dinner guests are vying for the best places at the table. The conclusion of the parable in Jesus' words is, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Peter, in his first letter, adds that God will exalt the humble "in due time" (1 Peter 5:6). This is what makes taking the lower place so challenging. It may be a long time before I am asked to move up.

It is almost humorous the way we battle for the best parking space, the best seat in the movie theater (or in church!), or the shortest line at the supermarket. Less humorous is the insatiable lust for power and wealth that has infected so many corporations, universities, and

organizations. To refuse to play the game of “me first” could be one of the most powerful Christian witnesses to this culture.

This story about Senator Mark Hatfield, who powerfully displayed Christ in the world of politics, encourages me to take the lower place. He attended a weekly Bible study luncheon at his church in Washington along with many other politicians and professionals. When the meeting was over, most people would rush back to their important business. Senator Hatfield, however, could often be seen folding and stacking chairs after everyone else had left. No one in attendance had the magnitude of responsibilities that he had. Nevertheless, he chose to stay, to take the lower place of doing the menial task, much as Jesus did by taking the towel and the basin at the last supper and washing the disciples’ feet. When Jesus had finished, He called us all to the lower place: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:15).

How do I respond to praise and criticism?

In 2 Samuel 23:13–17, David provides a model of humility toward those who love us and toward those who oppose us. When three of his “mighty men” showed their devotion by risking their lives to bring him water from Bethlehem, David did something astonishing. He would not drink it but “poured it out before the Lord,” saying he was not worthy of such devotion. This spirit of humility seems to be lost today. We gladly drink up praises, adulation, and admiration—seeking to be exalted rather than to be humble before the Lord. We would do well to follow David’s example of deflecting praise and devotion from himself to the Lord, who alone is worthy to receive it.

David also demonstrates humility toward his enemies. Saul was trying to kill David, and on at least two occasions David had the opportunity to do away with Saul. Yet he refused, saying, “I will not lift my hand against the Lord’s anointed” (see 1 Samuel 24; and 1 Samuel 26).

Jesus said that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). Paul adds, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (Romans 12:17). Is this my response to those who advocate political causes I consider immoral and unbiblical? Do I pray for those who criticize me? Am I an agent of Christ’s love to those with whom I disagree? Or do I take the easy path and love only those who love me? The acid test of my humility is how I respond when I am criticized, opposed, or persecuted. Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who crucified Him, and we are called to follow in His steps.

Is this possible?

Even the possibility of this life of humility toward others seems beyond my reach. How could I ever live at that level?

Thomas á Kempis supplies the answer, or at least the source of a humble life. His book *The Imitation of Christ* is a classic statement of Christian humility, and this closing sentence is the most important one of all for those who desire to walk in humility.

Prop yourself up with and for Christ if you wish to live with Christ. If just once you could perfectly enter the inner life of Jesus and experience a little of His passionate love, then you would not care at all about what you might gain or lose in life. You would even bear insults gladly, for the love of Jesus makes a person think of himself in a very humble way.

If the acid test of our humility is our relationships, then Jesus is our perfect model. Our pride is overcome, vanquished, when our focus and our energy are directed to becoming less like us

and more like the One who is gentle and humble in heart.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

HOWARD BAKER is a spiritual director with Young Life—Rocky Mountain Region and an instructor in spiritual formation at Denver Seminary. Someday he would like to operate a small retreat center.

He wrote this article because “the egotism, selfish ambition, and celebrity worship that has found its way into the church is disturbing. The great contingent of humble Christians who live faithful lives seeking Christ are ignored or, worse, taken advantage of. I hope this article serves to humble the exalted and exalt the humble.”