

If ever there is a bane upon the human heart, a gnarled root which bears the bitterest fruit upon society, it is pride. It was the first sin, the preeminent sin in the garden, coming from the foremost of the proud, Satan himself. And if there is ever a boon to the human heart, a brilliant gem in the setting of the noble heart's pendant, it is humility. It is the preeminent root from which all other virtues spring. Christian love is humble love. Christian service is humble service. Christian mercy is humble mercy. Christian worship is humble worship.

Therefore, it is imperative that we learn what humility is, what it is not, and then how we are to put on true humility as a virtue of the heart which has been made new, united to Christ Jesus, and is reflective of the character of the King. If we are to wear the uniform of those who belong to God, then we need to know what the uniform looks like and how to put it on.

First of all, let me point out that the humility which Paul instructs here is the relational humility between fellow humans. There is the humility which a creature has before the Creator, which is based upon very particular distinctions of being (finite and infinite, for example). This is not the humility under consideration here. There are Scriptures for that humility, but this is humility towards one another, who do not have distinctions of being, but who are all equally creatures, equally made in the image of God, and equally united to Christ if one has believed in Him. Remember, these are relational virtues which instruct us how to feel and act towards one another.

As we have seen, all the virtues of God have counterfeit fruit, and so does humility. And the reality of false humility is that it can be incredibly damaging to others and damaging to oneself, primarily because all false humility is actually pride, and pride is

the most destructive deception of the soul. It is pride which sets itself against God as an enemy. It is pride which wallows in self-loathing and self-pity, immobilized by fear and anxiety, running away from God's kindness rather than resting in it. And false humility, that appearance of being humble, but, in reality, is actually a form of self-reliance and self-trust, is one of those virtuous sins that has led many well-meaning Christians to hopelessness and harm and is a tool used by many ill-meaning wolves to lead others to slavery, hopelessness, and destruction. Therefore, let us first examine what humility is not.

Humility is not weakness. Now, weakness definitely humbles us, but humility itself is not weakness. In fact, the word "humility" here means "to make little of one's thoughts". It is, in a sense, to 'think low' when it comes to one's own judgments. Paul told the Romans in 12:16, "Never be wise *in your own sight*." "In your own sight" is the important issue here. We are not to consider ourselves 'better' or 'more than' by our own estimation, judgment, or discernment, when it comes to honor. Rather, we are to join together with the lowly, those dishonored by the world, the ashamed. This is the essence of humility, not that you are worthy of shame, but that you lower yourself to serve one who is ashamed, or lacks honor.

But to serve such a person is not weakness. To lower oneself to treat another person as honorable is not an appreciation of inability or weakness or futility or fault. It does not require a recognition that you have no power. No, you can have strength and be humble, and you can be weak and be proud. We see this all the time. In fact, one of the most obvious examples of pride that you will ever see is the self-exaltation of a small child who demands his own way. He screams and fusses and flails and, if he

knew the words, would curse you to your face for not serving his desires. He has judged by his own wisdom that the world should revolve around him, that he should receive all that his little heart desires. He is proud...and he is weak. And the faithful and loving parent, so strong and capable, takes an infant in her arms and serves him. The strong adult humbles herself to serve the weak one. Why? She loves her weak child. Love humbles itself in order to bring about the flourishing of another, whether weaker or stronger.

Humility is not worthlessness. This deception has devastated countless of God's people, I believe. In wanting to obey the Lord, we erroneously count ourselves worthless rather than count our right to be honored as worth laying down. We get confused as to how we are to serve others without it meaning that we are nothings, that our words are unworthy of speaking, that our opinions are worthless, or that our very selves are of utter insignificance. This imposter of humility is what has led many Christians, especially women, into quietly participating in the cycle of abuse, where an arrogant and self-centered man takes advantage of her well-meant desire to be humble and submissive. And when a man uses demeaning and belittling language to get his own way, under the mantle of telling her that she needs to be humbly submissive, it feeds this false idea of humility that robs her of her individual personhood and the honor which God has freely bestowed on her, not only as one who bears His holy image, but also as one who is united to His Christ and is freely loved and honored and adored by God Himself. This danger of losing one's personhood, of considering oneself as a nothing, a nobody, as worthless, is a lie which the Accuser uses to paralyze and isolate us and enable violent men to continue to serve their own pride.

But humility is not worthlessness. It is the willful laying down of rights, not because I am insignificant, but because I am seeking to signify the glory of another, preeminently that of God who is worthy of all glory and honor, and secondarily of man who is created in his image. In fact, if humility is laying down one's rights to honor and respect for the sake of another's flourishing, then it must be that humility serves another person, not for their perception of being served, but for the glory of God and the holiness of my fellow human. Therefore, humility can be honorable...very honorable. Honorable because it is consistent with the character of God Himself.

In Philippians 2, we are commanded to **“Have this thinking among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be clung to, but he emptied himself by taking on the form of a servant, being made in the image of a human. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. THEREFORE, God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name over every name...”**

You see, the Son of God, the most glorious of all glories, the uncreated Maker of all which exists, who, as God, is worthy of all honor and power and dominion and glory and whose strength is unsurpassed and unqualifiable in its incomparability – THAT ONE humbled himself. How can humility mean worthlessness when the most worthy one humbled himself? It cannot.

You see, I think that we struggle today to understand authority and submission because we misunderstand the relationship between honor and the exercising of power. We equate them. They are not equitable. We see this inequity in Jesus Christ, who had all

the power of the Creator and the rights to exercise it, yet laid it down. He did not execute it. He submitted to someone else, to the Father, and became a servant. He thus sanctified submission and correlated humility with honor. God humbled Himself for your holiness. Humility is not worthlessness.

Humility is also not wordless. We erroneously equate a humble heart with a silent mouth. We think it too proud to speak, and we are often smacked down by the proud when we speak words of life. Like compassion and kindness, humility also speaks up about injustice and about sin which destroys the soul of those whom we love. It is not arrogant to tell people “no.” It is not arrogant to say to a brother, “You are sinning and need to stop.” Jesus did not stay silent when the Pharisees were burdening people, or when the money changers belittled the Gentiles by taking their place of prayer to set up their tables. He was not silent when his apostles argued about who was greatest, or how many times they should forgive, or when they minimized the value of children by treating them as less important than the adults. Jesus, in his humility, spoke the truth...and gave His life as a ransom for many. He combined speaking the truth in love. He showed us both what true authority looked like, laying down his life for His people, and what true submission looked like, “Not my will, but yours be done, Father.” But, his humility spoke up. Humility is not wordless.

You will notice quite a bit of overlap in these virtues. Compassion is both using our strength to change the condition of the weak and doing what is best for others even if they become upset with you for challenging them. Kindness does the same, walking through the fires of suffering with others AND creating boundaries for others out of a desire to see them flourish. Humility does the same things: going low to serve others,

taking a lower rank by laying down our right to be recognized and honored and revered and appreciated, and also speaking up about the need to change and repent and convert to walking in righteousness by entrusting oneself to Christ.

The reason that there is so much overlap is because each of these elements of ‘clothing’, these virtues consistent with the character of God, is woven out of the same fabric of love. It is godly love. And godly love is exemplified in Christ Jesus who both spoke the truth, convicted us of our great need to be saved and need to be changed, and also gave His life in our place to bring that salvation about. He loves us in word and deed, and sometimes those words and deeds say, “no” to us and correct us and call us to repentance. That is biblical love and compassion and kindness and humility are all woven from it.

So, now that we have looked at what humility is not, let us look at what it is. **What is humility?**

First of all, humility is the attitude and action of a person assuming a lower rank than another person. This is what Paul meant when he said that Jesus “emptied himself” in Philippians 2. He emptied himself of his right to be honored, of his right to be master of his own life, of his right to be saluted and revered. Though He was the King, he took the rank of servant.

Humility, then, is to “forget your honor for the sake of another.” To think of yourself as lower in rank, that it is right for you to serve another person for their sake. It is RIGHT for me to work for their holiness, their flourishing, their life.

The reason that this humility is so difficult for us to fully grasp is that the human heart is constantly busying itself trying to prove that it is honorable, because it surreptitiously assumes that such proof determines one's significance. In the context of Colossians and what we have been discussing, it is constantly busying itself trying to prove that it belongs, that things are right between me and the world, between me and God, because I have performed honorably. Therefore, I deserve to be honored and treated well. And the way which our hearts assume to find this belonging, to make ourselves feel important and worthy of honor, is by comparing ourselves to others. Hence, pride enters in as the umpire of our honor, of our belonging. We compare and compete to prove our performance is adequate and that we are justified as worthy of belonging. And we are fed this lie daily by our own hearts and by the world around us. Our society places honor upon performance, upon our adequacy. And our hearts are doing the same thing, working for a verdict of acceptable, right to belong, significant based upon its performance of goodness, constantly worried about its reputation, its glory. For example, your heart says to you, "You will belong if you are beautiful and attractive." Or, "You will belong because you are wise." Or, "You will be OK if you are financially secure." Or, "You will be somebody if you are a good parent." You see, there is something desperately wrong with our hearts, and this anxious busying of our souls is evidence of it. We are constantly thinking of ourselves, of whether or not we are doing well, running well, believing well, performing well. We are so worried about defending ourselves and proving ourselves.

Your soul is always doing this. It is always drawing your attention to it, because it has something wrong with it, bothered about how it looks, how it was treated by that

person, about how it feels. We are constantly lamenting, “You hurt my feelings.” What does that even mean? How can you hurt feelings? Do your feelings have feelings? No, what we mean by this is that you hurt my pride! Somebody doubted your performance, your righteousness, your right to belong, and you feel ashamed, guilty, and unworthy. Your feelings are working fine. It’s your ego that is hurt, and it hurts because it’s out of joint. It is caring too much about proving itself and not enough about Christ. So, it grabs attention, just like any out-of-joint body part.

I mean, you don’t go around talking about how great your toes feel today, right? But, you can’t get through the day without feeling ignored, or snubbed, or mistreated, or feeling ashamed or belittled. There’s something wrong with where you are relying for your identity, your belonging, your rightness, and pride is always wanting to be noticed and is never really at rest because its failures are real and its successes are incomplete and will always be questioned.

Because we are often deceived that the only way that we will ever have a life-worth-living, that we will ever fully belong, is if we perform honorably and are recognized for it, respected for it, and admired for it.

Think about it. Why do we lack compassion? Is it not because we are busy comparing ourselves with those weaker than us and feeling the need to prove that we have done well? We look down on others and treat them as lower than us, puffing ourselves up if help them, being nice to them to make sure that people know that we are good people in order to justify ourselves.

But humility is not about proving that I am good! Love's goal is not about me, but about the growth in grace of the other person, of their flourishing and holiness and fruitfulness. **And here's some good biblical tests to see how we are doing in humility** as it is expressed in how we are doing in comparing ourselves to others:

How have you used your tongue this week? Have you gossiped? Have you spoken of another person's struggles, failures, sorrows, weaknesses, to someone else? Why did you do that? Is it not a form of comparison? A cowardly form, but a comparison nonetheless. Were you seeking to build up their honor? Were you trying to see them flourish? What about boasting to others of your successes? Were you harmfully critical? Have you belittled and demeaned another without speaking words of life and hope to them?

Humility speaks from below in order to build others up in Christ Jesus. It speaks, and it speaks life. Paul told the Ephesians not to let any "corrupting talk proceed from your mouth." That is talk that tears down, that causes disintegration. But humility speaks in order to bring integration. Because when we entrust ourselves to Jesus, when our union with Christ is our only hope, then we have nothing to compare to others with any kind of superiority. We do not speak in order to compare ourselves as better, or worse! We speak to edify, to point to Jesus as their hope of glory, to turn from their death-clothes and behold the glorious Christ.

When we are Christ-adequate like this, when we are resting in Christ-in-us-our-hope-of-glory, we rejoice in other people's success because we have pleasure in the success itself, not what it can gain us. The one resting in her union with Christ never says, "I told you so," or, "I thought of that first." She simply rejoices that a person has grown,

or understood, or been changed. It's not about her, or even her role in their growth. It's about them and their growth itself and the glory which God receives in it.

Humility, then, is what Martin Luther called, "that blessed self-forgetfulness." It is to be so resting in Christ to grant me belonging and righteousness and significance that I can truly forget myself, lay down my right to be noticed, and seek the flourishing of another.

So, how do we get this kind of self-forgetfulness? How can I stop being so anxious about how I am treated and whether or not I receive honor from others?

Well, what was the Holy Spirit's answer in Philippians 2 as to how we are to humble ourselves? Look to Jesus! Look to our union with Him – that His humility led to his exaltation, and it will to yours, too. You died to all this comparison, and your honorable performance is achieved by Him and granted to you. You have performed honorably, no matter what your struggles may say, what doubts may assail you, what others may say about you. Christ is your life and your hope of glory, so humble yourself.

You see, this gospel of grace, this union with Christ by grace through faith, is the answer for our pride. The answer to all of our anxiety is not higher self-esteem, to think more of ourselves, and neither is it worthlessness, to think less of ourselves, it is soul rest, to think of ourselves less. It is higher self-esteem or low self-esteem, but Christ-esteem, to consider the Christ to whom we are united as the source of our 'okay-ness'.

The kindness of God in uniting us to Christ, in answering for our failures of faith, our failures of morality, our failures of every kind. We died for those failures. We have paid them down. When? In Christ. We died with Him. And we were raised up with Him to the newness of life, to a life fit and suitable for glory, which is yet our hope, and which is secured and held in guardianship by Christ Jesus Himself who conquered sin and death and sits enthroned in heaven at God's right hand having completed all the works necessary for us to receive all the blessings of God.

The gospel humbles my pride because it shows me that I am so deeply sinful the Son of God had to come answer for me. This gospel also emboldens my anxious heart because it shows me that I am more deeply loved than I can ever dare to hope.

When we grasp our union with Christ, this bold humility alters the way that we relate to others. It stops the wicked destructive tongue of gossip among us. It ceases slander and blame-shifting and defensiveness because Christ is my hope, not my performance. And those who live boldly humble will look terribly weird to the world. Terribly weak. Not as those noteworthy in the annals of the powerful in our world. Yet, they are filled with a confidence that defies description. I love how John Owen describes such a believer:

“A believer may be in the saddest and darkest condition imaginable.

Even so, the Holy Spirit is able to break through all this and bring to mind the promises of Christ. By this work, the Holy Spirit enables

Christians to sit in dungeons, rejoice in flames and glory in troubles.

If he brings to mind the promises of Christ for our comfort, neither

**Satan nor man, neither sin nor the world, nor even death itself, shall
take away our comfort. – John Owen**

Such a person is also never hurt badly by criticism. It doesn't bother him, it doesn't keep him up at night, and though it may hurt, it doesn't devastate him and lead to blame-shifting, gossip, or anger. Why not? Because he doesn't put too much stock in what other people think. Now, some people don't put too much stock into what other people think, but their solution is instead to put too much stock into what they think of themselves. "I know that I think and that's all that is important." Such an aggressive arrogance is a terrible bane on relationships, not a builder of them. And another person may respond to criticism in a self-centered passive way, "I am a nobody! I am hopeless! I must protect myself!" and therefore run away from difficult relationships because every criticism is a threat to their very existence. So, you either have a person is devastated by criticism, they think too much of what others judge, or you have a person who can't accept criticism, they think too much of their own opinion. We don't know how to heal low self-esteem except with pride, and they both are devastating nuisances to our souls and to our relationships.

But a gospel-dependent boldly humble person accepts criticism and is not devastated by it.

I love how Paul expresses this in 1 Corinthians 4:1-4.

**One should think about us this way – as servants of Christ and stewards of the
mysteries of God. ² Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful.**

³ So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court.

In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not acquitted because of this. The one who judges me is the Lord.

Here's how you put on gospel humility. Every day we are living our lives in a courtroom, trying to win a verdict, with everything that we think, feel, or do either being admitted for the prosecution or the defense. Some days you feel like you're winning the trial and some days you feel like you're losing the trial and are buffeted by fears and tossed about with the anxious awaiting of the verdict. Paul has found the secret: The trial is over for him. He is out of the courtroom, the ultimate verdict has already come in: complete in Christ. Only the opinion of the Lord counts.

How can this be? We are out of the courtroom because Jesus Christ co-signed as a defendant and went into the courtroom. He became the Lamb, the sacrifice, the substitute in our place and accepted the verdict of guilty and presented His evidence for innocence as a co-signer. He bore the verdict that we deserved and gave us His, which we didn't. So now, for the believer in Jesus Christ, His verdict of innocent applies to us and it comes before our performance (Romans 8:1). We perform knowing the verdict is in already. We can now work without fear and with humility. You see, it is only the Gospel of sheer grace that brings true humility. It is the Gospel that sets us free from our overly sensitive voracious egos and gives us peace with God and with each other. When we are self-forgetful and boasting in the Cross, we can love others for their sakes and not ours. We can make peace with others in truth and not pretense. For now when God looks at you he sees one who is infinitely valuable and lovely, for you are in Jesus. How can you worry about being snubbed now? How can you worry about how

you're treated now? Where is the power of fear? It is gone. It has been cast out by perfect love, His perfect love. Jesus makes us boldly humble and humbly bold.