



A Life of Humility & Service

“Those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11)

We go to the feet of Jesus to learn what it means to be the church. When the church spends time with Jesus, learning from Jesus, and acting like Jesus, we discover what it looks like to fulfill our God-given mission in this world. Jesus is a living Teacher who shows us daily how to live our lives as he would live if he were us.

As disciples of Jesus, we are constantly discerning how to become the kind of people who naturally do the kinds of things Jesus would do. Paul writes, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). This is the great challenge for us: to be such imitators of Christ that people can look at our lives and understand how Jesus would think, live, and act in the context of today’s world. To do this takes the fullest of formation into Christlikeness.

One element of this formation is humility. Humility is the way we come to follow Jesus, and the life of a disciple should reflect the humility of Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate example of humility and greatness; he knew he was God’s own Son, but he laid down his divine power and greatness and appeared on earth as we all do.

In many ways, Jesus shows his disciples that “advancing” means “lowering.” From his example, we see that to live a life of humility is to become like Jesus in his willingness to choose the hidden way of love and service rather than the way of power and privilege. By following Jesus we learn that we receive the grace of humility by applying ourselves to things that place us in a proper relationship with God, with others, and ultimately with ourselves. Jesus tells us to strive to do another’s will rather than our own, to always seek the lower place, and to serve our family, neighbors, friends, and even our enemies.

Ultimately, the life of Jesus was a life of humility, teaching us that our lives are to be lived not just for ourselves, but for the sake and benefit of others.

The Path of Humility

To reach us, God's love takes the path of humility. In humility God comes among us and lowers himself. We see this expression of humility in Jesus, who had the status of God, but did not cling to that status. Instead, he emptied himself of all status and did the equivalent of going from being the greatest to being the least, taking on flesh, and becoming an ordinary human being (see Philippians 2:5-11).

It is on this humble path, chosen by God, that love proceeds and exalts others. Jesus walks with God's people, with sinners, and even with the proud (consider how much he did to help the proud hearts of the Pharisees). Throughout his life on earth, Jesus demonstrated a spirit of profound humility, saying that he came "not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). In Jesus we see a constant turning toward others in acts of humility and service. Perhaps the most striking example occurs on the night of the last supper. On his last night with the disciples, he took a towel and basin and washed their dirty feet (John 13:1-11), instructing them to follow his example of servanthood with one another (13:12-17). But that wasn't all. Jesus went even lower and took the most shameful status one could possibly imagine. His obedience to God took him to the point of death. And not just any death, the most humiliating death imaginable, death on a cross. This is the humility of God.

To walk the path of humility begins with Jesus, the God who always waits for us and walks with us every step of the way. And as Jesus will show us, this path is characterized not by selfishness but by humility, not by hoarding but by giving, not by serving our own interests but by serving others—just as we have been served by Jesus.

True Humility, True Greatness (Mark 10:35-45)

Jesus is, as he tells James and John after their request, a servant Messiah. And to follow a servant Messiah means to be a servant. By his own example, Jesus calls us to a life of humble service.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, where he would be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they would condemn him to death. On the way, James and John requested to sit on Jesus' right and left in his glory. They were asking for positions of conventional power. They imagined Christ's kingdom would be basically like Caesar's kingdom. But Jesus tells James and John (and Jesus tells us today), that authority in the Kingdom looks radically different than our ideas. We have come to believe that only the strong ones make it to the top. Those with the most strength, power, and wealth — but the kingdom of God doesn't operate according to the world.

This is partly why Jesus told James and John they didn't know what they were asking. They thought they were requesting positions of power and privilege, when in reality they were asking to be crucified with Jesus. When the rest of the disciples heard of their attempted grab at power, "they were indignant with James and John" (Mark 10:41). So Jesus sat the Twelve down and said—

"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

Jesus describes how the kingdom of God is different than the kingdoms of the world. He refers to those who are regarded as rulers in the world of the Roman Empire. They "lord it over" their subjects. Their great ones exercise authority as tyrants, an authority that stands in contrast to the edifying authority displayed by Jesus. For Jesus, the place of authority is the place of humility, and once again he redefines what it means to be first and great.

At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples that they are to serve one another in the same way that he has served them (see John 13). His example suggests that loving as he has loved means taking the role of a servant, caring for the needs of others without expecting anything in return. This is the kind of attitude that Jesus said would define the lives of those who claimed to follow him.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us that there is only one way to sit at the top of his kingdom — You must be humble: **“God blesses those who are humble. For they will inherit the earth.”** (Matt 5:5 NLT). To be sure, “humble” does not mean “insignificant compared to you.” Instead, a humble person is a person with great authority, but one who does not lord it over others.

True humility is a sign of greatness in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:24-27), and to live a life of humility begins with Jesus as a servant before us, humbling himself and us. It is in pouring ourselves out in love as Jesus has done for us that we become able to function as his servants, his sent ones, his friends, reflections of his light in the dark world God loves.

Those Who Humble Themselves Will Be Exalted (Luke 14:11; 18:14)

“When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.” (Luke 14:8-9)

With this teaching, Jesus does not intend to give rules of social behavior, but rather a lesson on the value of humility. History teaches that pride and vanity are the causes of many evils. And Jesus helps us to understand the necessity of choosing the last place, that is, of seeking to be small and hidden: humility. When we place ourselves before God in this posture of humility, God exalts us. He stoops down to us so as to lift us up to himself: **“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”** (14:11). Honor comes to those who express humility.

The well-known story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector can help us recognize our own spiritual pride. To those “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on others,” Jesus tells this parable of a much-despised tax collector and a self-righteous Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee commends himself to God because of his careful observance of the law and to look down with contempt on the sinful tax collector. *“God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”* (18:11-12)

Notice in his prayer that his focus is not on God but on how good he is and how bad others are. In contrast, the tax collector is so painfully aware of his sins and unworthiness before God that he cannot even lift his eyes. Pounding his chest in sorrow, he cries out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” His focus is on his own condition, not the sins of others, and especially on his need for God’s mercy. In a surprising reversal of expectation, Jesus says that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home in right relationship with God. Jesus then concludes with his main point: **“All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”** (18:14).

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less ... Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call “humble” nowadays: he will not be a person who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody.

Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Understanding Humility By Defining Christ's Humility¹

How can the humility on display in Jesus' life and teaching inform our definition and acquisition of humility?

In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul tells us that we are to have in ourselves the mindset that was in Christ Jesus, and then specifies that mindset by the behavior. And what did Jesus do? "He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself." And this one, who was now found in human form, this one "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death."

In what does Christ's humility consist? Not in thinking himself unimportant. Not in locating himself below humankind on a scale of all the universe's relative goods. Not in seeing himself as worthless. Not as finding himself without value. Of course none of this could be true for God, the maker of heaven and earth, the source of all worth and goodness.

What then does it mean? Paul seems to say that humility is a matter of how we view our rights and how we view our relation to others.

First, humility is a matter of not clinging to that which is ours by right. Jesus did not cling to or grab hold of that which should be or would be his as God. For honor, glory, reputation, status—all these were inconsequential to him. But this is a purely negative statement—a statement of *what humility is not*.

Second, and positively, humility is a matter of using ourselves and our sphere of influence to elevate others, to lift them up, bless them, encourage them, and honor them. Humility does not operate on a fixed scale of worth, but with a flexible one, using its resources to bless, and move others up, whatever scale they find themselves on. Are they weak? The strong use their resources to strengthen them. Are they poor? The wealthy raise them out of poverty. Are they oppressed? The secure use their security, share their security, not clinging to it as their own, that others might share in those blessings.

Humility, in short, is the twin movement of not clinging to something that is ours, but using it for the benefit of others, that they might share in it to their benefit.

In this sense, we cannot take the first step in proclaiming the God of the Gospel without proclaiming him to be the humble God. The God who did not cling to his blessed eternal life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but made this life a means for sharing his blessings with us—a costly and sacrificial mode of sharing which took the shape and form of the cross.

But this loss, this suffering on God's part, is not all we have to say. It is not a matter of becoming lesser and smaller. Or rather, it is these things, but only as part of a bigger picture: for the blessing and exaltation of others. And this is why Philippians 2:9-11 is so vital: The humble God is simultaneously the exalting and exalted God. The Jesus who bore the cross is the same Jesus who was exalted above every power and principality. Yes, God is the humble God—but he is the humble God as the one who is simultaneously and eternally exalted and exalting.

The humility of God—the humility we are called to share as followers of Christ—is a humility that takes its own blessings, resources, and rights, and does not cling to them, but uses them to restore, build up, and bless others.

¹ This section is adapted from Adam Johnson's article, "Be Humble as I am Humble: The Humility of God and the Imitation of Christ" ([Link to article](#)).

Discussion

1. Humility is a habit and disposition that depends on gratitude for the lives we've been given. So begin with gratitude. What are some things you are grateful for in past week?
2. When you think of a humble person, what about their character makes you think of humility?
3. As disciples we are to imitate Christ in such a way that people can look at our lives and understand how Jesus would think, live, and act in the context of today's world. What have you learned about humility and service from Jesus? How do we translate those things into the context of our world today?
4. The world around us scrambles to be the first, the greatest, the strongest. Jesus seeks and blesses those who are willing to become the least and the last. Why do we resist taking the least and lowest place? What makes it difficult to do this? In what ways have you experienced the blessing that comes from taking the lowest position?
5. Adam Johnson writes that the humility of God, which we are called to share as followers of Christ, is a humility "that takes its own blessings, resources, and rights, and does not cling to them, but uses them to restore, build up, and bless others." How would you describe the relationship between humility, gratitude, mercy and generosity? What lessons have you learned about gratitude and mercy through being humbled?
6. What are some practical ways that you can imitate and pursue the humility of Christ in your life this week — valuing others above yourself, not looking to your own interests but to the interests of others?