

C.S. Lewis Fellows Theme Study
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Humility and Pride

Humility is one of the most central Biblical virtues. Augustine said that the first priority in the Christian life is humility; the second – humility and the third – humility.

The Old Testament makes it clear in many places that God is opposed to pride but loves humility. At the very beginning, in Genesis 3, we see the primordial temptation to disobey God and set ourselves up as little gods. The serpent says that if Adam disobeys, “you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). The basic temptation is to autonomy (auto=self; *nomos*=law). The basic temptation of disobedience is, in effect, to will the overthrow of God. It is to choose our own selfish way rather than God’s way. It is cosmic treason, desiring to reject God’s authority in favor of our own autonomous authority. The sin of pride is a failure to know and admit our proper place as creations before God. There are many passages in the Old Testament that talk about humility and pride. We can’t discuss them all here, but we can note some highlights.

One of the great summary verses on this subject is Micah 6:8, “and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” Humility seems to be a precondition for justice and kindness. Perhaps this is so because both these virtues (justice and kindness) require getting out of ourselves and first noticing others’ needs, then acting to meet them.

In the book of Proverbs we see a further development of the relations between pride and humility in the Old Testament. One of the most well known is, “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Prov. 16:18). When we are

blinded by pride, we are oblivious to dangers around us. Thus it is much easier to make a misstep leading to a stumble and our own destruction. A couple of other Proverbs make a similar observation in different words: “A man who flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his steps” (Prov. 29:5). The flattery may lead to pride that makes us oblivious to the minefields we are going through (nets). Another is, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace (a trap), but with humility comes wisdom” (Prov. 11:2). Not only does pride set you up to fall into a trap, but it prevents you from gaining wisdom. In order to become wise you need to be teachable and that involves admitting that there are things you don’t know. Note especially how much God is opposed to pride: “Everyone who is proud is an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 16:5). While we are looking at ourselves, it’s almost impossible to see God or others. God hates pride so much because it involves the self-deification mentioned earlier.

In the New Testament there are a couple of Greek words that are used to describe humility. One is *praus* and another related word is *prautes*. *Praus* means meek or lowly. *Prautes* also means meekness and indicates a spirit or attitude with which we accept God’s dealings with us or how others treat us. Aristotle defines *prautes* as the middle course between two extremes (with respect to anger). We can get angry without a reason or not get angry at all. *Prautes* is getting angry at the right time in the right measure and for the right reason.

When Jesus says in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the meek (humble, gentle), for they shall inherit the earth,” He is not encouraging weakness. The word for meek is *praus*, and meekness is not weakness. *Praus* encourages an attitude of mind and heart which demonstrates gentleness not in weakness but power. It is a virtue born in strength

of character. Sometimes what we think is weak (meekness) is strong and what we think is strong (pride) is actually weak.

Another Greek word is *epieikeia* which means mildness, forbearance, gentleness or graciousness. In II Corinthians 10:1, Paul uses both *prautes* and *epieikeia* to describe the attitude of Christ: “Now I, Paul, myself, urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (II Cor. 10:1). In Matthew 11:29 you have a similar description of Jesus (in his own words): “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you shall find rest for your souls.”

Another Greek word is *Tapeinos*, which means lowly and humble. In classical Greek it meant literally low-lyings but was soon used in a metaphorical sense. This word and other associated words are used 34 times in the New Testament. It is used when Mary says in the Magnificat, “for he has regard for the low estate of his handmaiden” (Lk. 1:48) or later in the prayer, “He has exalted those of low degree.”

In Matthew 18:1-5 Jesus calls a child into the midst of the disciples and says that unless they become like children they will not enter the kingdom and “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (vs. 4). This does not mean that we are to make ourselves lower than we actually are, but like a child know how low we really are.

One of the classic passages in Scripture on Christ, Philippians 2:3-11, encourages us in the kind of humility Christ had: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit but with humility (*Tapeinophrosyne*) of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself . . . Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus. . . He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.” Jesus was

equal with God, but nevertheless emptied Himself of divine prerogatives and humbled Himself. We are to have this attitude in ourselves.

In I Peter 5:5 we are encouraged to clothe ourselves with humility like putting on a garment. “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility . . .” This attitude of humility is especially demonstrated in Jesus washing his disciples’ feet in John 13:5-17. Jesus not only did something not even servants were required to do, but he also washed Judas’ feet knowing that Judas was going to betray him (John 13:2; 13:18-19). Jesus calls us to follow his example (John 13:14-15) sometimes literally and also metaphorically. He says that we will be blessed if we do (John 13:17).

The Greek word *hubris* is sometimes used un-translated in English. It is not the most often used word for pride in the New Testament, but it is used in Romans 1:30 for those that have rebelled against God. They are among other things, “slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful . . .” (sounds like the new atheists?) The word “insolent” is a form of *hubris*. It is also used about those who “insult the Spirit of grace” in Heb. 10:29.

Another Greek word, *hyperephanos*, is used more often, such as in Luke 1:51 (Magnificat again) where God “has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.” In the Romans 1:30 passage above, it is the word for “arrogant.” It is used in I Peter 5:5 (see also James 4:6) where it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

The larger context of this last passage, I Peter 5:1-7, deals with Peter’s exhortation to elders in the Church. They are to shepherd the Church, but lest this be misunderstood and be taken as a license for abusive control, he tells them what this does

not mean as well as what it does mean. Shepherding does not mean exercising oversight as under compulsion, but rather, as a voluntary, willing task (vs 2). It is not to be used to make a lot of money “nor yet for sordid gain” (vs. 2). Another danger is lording it over those allotted to your charge. In other words, beware of the kind of attitude in leadership that desires to play God or impersonate the Spirit in someone’s life. Beware of insisting on authority structures or titles, but rather, prove to be “examples to the flock.” In other words, the authority of an elder is not to rest primarily in the title but in a kind of moral authority earned by example. Peter notes that we should, above all, look to the Chief Shepherd – Christ. The younger men are called to submit to their elders (vs. 5), but both are immediately reminded: “all of you clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, for God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you at the proper time” (vs. 5-6).

This idea of being humble so that God may exalt is repeated by Jesus in a couple of texts (Matt. 23:12; Luke 14:11; Luke 18:14). In the Luke 14 passage the context is a banquet where Jesus sees people choosing the seats of honor for themselves. It is better, Jesus says, to take a lower place and have the host say, “No, no, no, that will never do, come up higher,” than to take a higher place and have the host say, “No, no, no, that place is reserved for another, (how dare you!) come down lower.” Jesus concludes this parable by saying: “For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (vs. 11). Francis Schaeffer has a classic sermon on this parable of the banquet guests where he exhorts us to never push into the higher position of significance in kingdom work. You may not be ready. Wait for God to “extrude” you

(like toothpaste from a tube) from the lower place into the higher when He knows you are ready.

This contrast between being humbled and exalted is also a central point of Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and Publican (Luke 18:14). The Pharisee exalts himself and trusts in his righteousness (fasting, praying, giving) and feels that he is better than the Publican (tax-collector) standing off in the edges of the crowd. On the other hand, the Publican cries out (while beating on his breast): "God be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus says that the Publican went down to his house justified (not the Pharisee). Then He concludes the parable by saying that whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and that whoever humbles himself will be exalted (vs. 14). In other words, the proud who trust in their own righteousness will not be justified. But the one who cries out for mercy (literally propitiation or atonement) will be exalted.

In II Timothy 3:2 Paul gives a list of qualities of ungodliness: "For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy." Paul's advice is to "Avoid such people" (II Tim. 3:5). James 4:6 warns against any kind of boasting or confidence in native skills or money. James warns later in the chapter, "Instead you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that . . . Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (James 4:15, 17). It is good to say, "If the Lord wills" (*deo volente*) to preface our plans. This takes our focus off of our own trust in our plans and ability to carry them out, and puts it on God's providence and provision.

In I John 2:16 we are told, "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the

world.” The word for pride here has at its root the word, *alazon*, which means the person who tries to impress others by making big claims – the braggart, the charlatan, the quack, the imposter. It is also the word used in James 4:6 mentioned above for “boasting in your arrogance.”

True humility is not thinking that you are better or worse than you are. It is consistent with having a “sober estimate of your capabilities” (Rom. 12:3). Certainly, pride is a great danger to spiritual life, but perhaps the greatest unacknowledged danger of the Church is a false humility. We can be proud of our shows of humility. We can also be so “abased” that we fail to recognize our dignity as made in the image of God. We also should not demean our God given gifts. If God gave us our gifts, they are good and not given in vain. We are called to clothe ourselves with humility, but this is difficult to do once and for all. One way to cultivate humility is not directly but indirectly. The more we know God, the more we know ourselves with respect to our finitude (limits), fallenness (sin), and dignity (image of God and status in Christ). The less we know ourselves (pride), the less we know God.