

# Some Thoughts about Humility

When people mention humility, it often seems that they talk mainly about its absence in people, rather than its presence. They may, for instance, describe someone as so "humble" that he is proud and boastful of it. Or they may jokingly refer to a person as qualified to write a book entitled, "Humility and How I Obtained it" - the implication being that the person *isn't* humble, though he may think he is.

In some groups, reference to genuine humility is so rare that one might wonder if it could even be recognized if it did exist. One could be left with the impression that humility operated by some great elusive principle, such as: "If you think you have it, you don't!"

Genuine humility doesn't draw attention to itself, so it has a tendency to be overlooked by people. Of course, there are times people do not see it, because it is truly absent. But perhaps the greatest problem for many is that they have a false or distorted idea of what humility is. And this misunderstanding may be true not only of the person being observed (and talked about), but also of those who are making the observations.

Some people believe that humility consists of merely belittling themselves. If praised for something they have done, they say their action was "nothing" - no matter how great or heroic that action may have actually been. In addition to belittling their actions, they may also say that they themselves are "nothing." When we look at the life of Jesus or the apostle Paul, we do not see this focus. Though there may be truth in considering oneself to be "nothing," it is at best only half of the truth. The other half - the more important half - is this: we need to give credit to the one who deserves it, to God.

Look at the examples in the Bible of genuine humility. Jesus did many great things, but who did he tell the people to praise? The Father! Never did Jesus want people to go around boasting about him! (Many people did boast about Jesus, in disobedience to him. And when they did it, it always caused problems for Jesus. See Mark 1:43-45 as an example.) And when the apostle Paul did wonderful things, he always gave God the credit for what was done. He may have often admitted his weaknesses, but he also acknowledged God's strength. In his mind, the two went together (2 Corinthians 12:10). We are weak; God is strong. Genuine humility will admit both, but its greatest desire is for God to receive the credit he deserves.

When the humble person does something that is good or praiseworthy, he does not say that what he did is "nothing" - that is, not good or praiseworthy. Instead, he truthfully acknowledges the fact that what he did came from God, and that it was possible only because of what God did in his heart. He does not want to steal the praise for himself, but to direct it toward the one who deserves it. Nor does he fail to give God the credit, by passively withholding deserved praise from God - by remaining silent. He knows that without God working in and through him, nothing good would have ever existed - and the humble person knows it, and is willing to admit it.

Many people have a false impression of the purpose of humility. They believe that it is a means by which we gain "approval" by God. They think that, by their "acts of humility," they will earn a place in heaven. But this is totally backwards! Until we are saved, we are spiritually dead and unable to do what pleases God! We can't even begin to have genuine humility until our relationship with God has been restored - until we have been made alive in Christ. Most false (man-made) religions focus on trying to gain acceptance from God by human efforts. True acceptance, in contrast, is made available only by what Jesus did on the cross, not by our own actions! Our actions (including our humility) come as the result of the change that Jesus made in our hearts; they are the fruit of our salvation, not the cause of it.

The humility that comes from God is the result of what God has done in our heart, and as a result, it is pleasing to God. In contrast, the "humility" of false religions is false, and offensive to God - even when it includes actions that might otherwise be of benefit to people. (This is because it is being done for the wrong reasons. And that dishonors God.)

New Testament humility carries the idea of being (or becoming) "little" or "low." This is vividly seen in the way the word is used in the realm of nature - to describe the leveling of a mountain (which could be used to symbolize pride or a "lifted-up" attitude). The New Testament examples of humility (Jesus and Paul), as well as the various other commands and statements found throughout the Bible, teach us how this concept applies to us. As we study what the Bible says, we learn how humility must affect our relationship with both God and neighbor (including neighbors who might be enemies). Genuine humility is not a mere option among many. Nor is it an unattainable "idealistic dream" that we hope for in far away eternity. Though we will not reach the fullest attainment of humility in this present life, we can attain it at least in part, as we submit to the Word of God. And we will be able to know if we have a degree of humility, just like we can know if we have the other "Christian virtues" (character traits, attitudes and conduct) that are commanded in various New Testament passages. We must, however, submit to the Word, if we are ever going to distinguish between the genuine and the fake! For without this submission, we may think we "know" yet be quite deceived.

In many ways, genuine humility is an expression of all that is intended in the greatest command of love toward God (Matthew 22:36-38). It is an acknowledgment of our position before God, the Creator of all things. As Ecclesiastes 5:2 reminds us, God is in heaven (with all the greatness that implies) and, in contrast, we are on the earth (with all the littleness that implies). Genuine humility is a truthful acknowledgment of that relationship, not merely an expression of "negative" comments about oneself. It is an acknowledgment of our complete dependence on God. More than that, it also is an acknowledgment that, because we are sinners, nothing good exists by nature within our hearts; everything good we have has its source in God, who lives in those who belong to him.

Genuine humility is also an expression of all that is intended in the second greatest command of love toward our neighbor (Matthew 22:39-40). The truly humble person does not exalt himself above others, but he has a "servant's heart" - just like Jesus did. He considers others as more important, and tries to exalt them or lift them up. He desires to treat others as better than himself because he truly considers them as deserving to be treated that way. He doesn't do it in an attempt to "impress" God (to get a bigger "prize" in heaven) but because the love of Christ is in him. He wants to follow the example of his master, who was willing to humble himself to the point of death, for others. And though he most likely will not have to go to the extreme of dying, as Jesus did, he will

use whatever opportunities he has to make his life an expression of Christ's love - a love that displays itself in, and through, him.

Perhaps the most dangerous attack against humility is the "humility" that involves wrong motives. The devil can use more obvious methods of attack, such as pride and arrogance, or ignorance and false perceptions about humility. But when motives become corrupted, even good actions may become evil in God's sight. The external actions - what people see - may look very much like an expression of genuine humility, but the hidden motives - what people cannot see - may be totally the opposite. Two people can do the same actions but for opposite reasons. The actions may be praiseworthy, and a refusal to do them may deserve condemnation by God. But God also knows the motives of the heart, and these will also be judged. And because of this, it is possible for two people to perform the same praiseworthy actions, but the one's actions may be pleasing and honoring to God, while the other's is a great offense to him. There is a great difference between being humble and acting humble.

It is very easy to have wrong motives for right actions. We need to examine why we do things. Do we, for instance, "lower" ourselves for the purpose of getting gain? Are our actions polluted by a desire to impress others - or worse yet, to impress God (something we will never succeed in doing)?

Even our attitude toward eternal rewards can be influenced by wrong motives. Do we tolerate being "lower" in this present world for the purpose of gaining bigger and better "crowns" in eternity? Don't forget that the truly humble person will still have a humble attitude in eternity. They will still know that they don't deserve the rewards they have received. Nobody will go parading about in heaven, boasting that his reward is greater than someone else's reward! What type of attitude do you think is displayed when the 24 elders lay their crowns before the throne of the Lord (Revelation 4:10)?

It is true that the Scriptures promise a reward for faithfulness, and it can be an encouragement when it seems that all our efforts are in vain. (See Galatians 6:9, for example.) But getting a reward is not our ultimate and greatest desire. Honoring and glorifying God is!

On that final Day, when we stand before God, the true attitudes and motives of our hearts will be seen for what they are. And these things - once hidden, but then made known - will strongly influence what happens to us for all eternity (Revelation 22:11).

With all these issues in mind, we need to strive to have genuine humility. We should take seriously the commands and examples given us in the Word of God. And to whatever extent humility does become a part of our lives, we should give God the praise and glory. For it is only because of him that humility is even possible.

We should also encourage others to have humility. There may be times that it is proper to speak against false humility and pride, when they are present. But we can place a greater emphasis on the real thing, rather than on the fake. And if we "practice what we preach," we can demonstrate by our own lives what humility really is.