



## “Rerouting: Humility”

*Matthew 5:7, 38-42; Romans 2:1-8*

***“Wonderful News for the meek [humble], you’re going to inherit the earth.”***

*N. T. Wright’s translation of Matthew 6:5*

Humility. Not something very often prized in our culture. Instead, our culture is focused on the elevation of self, pursuing self-actualization as the greatest of goals. But we Christians cannot succumb to the temptation of self above all. Take a moment and read the passage above from

Philippians, even if you think you know it well. Paul writes: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” I’d be hard-pressed to find a more counter-cultural viewpoint in all of Scripture.

But humility has always been lacking in humanity, which is evident in Matthew 6:1-4, as Jesus talks about the hypocrites. Some of them don’t seem to care at all about the genuineness of their prayers or the authenticity of their humility. It’s all about the show. Jesus says at another time, “Everything they [the Pharisees] do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries<sup>1</sup> wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others” (Matthew 23:5-7).

These vainglorious Pharisees have come to the belief that image is everything. It no longer matters to them the sort of Jew they really are, all that matters is how they are seen by others. They have long ago forgotten God’s words to Samuel as the prophet examined each of Jesse’s sons:

“The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Thus, lest we follow the path of the Pharisees, it is best that we spend some time seeking to understand humility, what we mean and what we don’t.

### ***Karen Swallow Prior on pride and humility:***

To be human is to struggle with pride. A few have too little of it; most, too much. There is a good sense of pride, of course, such as having pride in one’s work or one’s children. . . . In the Christian tradition, pride is understood as the excess of this good pride, what Aristotle terms vanity. Both the Aristotelian and the Christian tradition call for the proper proportion of esteem of oneself. . . .

Pride may be simple and it may be human, but it is a devastating vice. The root of pride, according to Aquinas, is lack of submission to God; pride, therefore, is “the beginning of all sin.” Pride is the sin attributed to the fall of Lucifer, who sought to ascend to the throne of God and be equal with the Most High (Isa. 14:12–15). Pride is the sin of Adam and Eve, who sought, in eating the forbidden fruit, to be like God (Gen. 3:5). The New Testament teaches that “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5; cf. Prov. 3:34). No wonder Pope Gregory I in the sixth century named pride the “root of vices,” the deadliest of the deadly sins . . . .

Accordingly, moral philosophers have long considered the virtue that opposes pride—humility—to be the foundation of all other virtues.

---

<sup>1</sup> A *phylactery* is a small leather box containing Hebrew texts on vellum, worn by Jewish men at morning prayer as a reminder to keep the law. See *Deuteronomy* 6:8.

John Chrysostom calls humility the “mother, and root, and nurse, and foundation, and bond of all good things: without this we are abominable, and execrable, and polluted.” Or as Peter Kreeft writes, “The greatest virtue keeps us from the greatest vice.”

Without humility, without an understanding of our proper place within the order of creation, we cannot cultivate the other virtues. We cannot even come to Christ, or to true knowledge, apart from humility.

But do we know what true humility is? . . . False humility so abounds that we often distrust humility when we think we see it: The celebrity or athlete who gestures to heaven following a stellar performance. The humblebrag posted on social media (“I’m struggling so much more to learn Russian than I did learning French, Spanish, and Japanese!”). The public figure who accepts a greater honor with the obligatory announcement that it is “humbling” to do so. The church leader who “humbles” himself by making a dramatic public confession of some petty and popular sin that serves only to make him more endearing and relatable. None of these examples portray how truly, well, humiliating, real humility is.

It’s helpful, as is often the case, to look at the etymology of the word. One thing I love about words is how their own stories can reveal so much about the history of ideas and worldviews, along with a deeper understanding of the concept. Humility is one such word. The ancient root from which we get the word, along with its sister “humble,” means “earth” or “ground.” Eugene Peterson explains, “This is the Genesis origin of who we are: dust—dust that the Lord God used to make us a human being. If we cultivate a lively sense of our origin and nurture a sense of continuity with it, who knows, we may also acquire humility.” Implicit in the word humility is the acknowledgment that we “all come from dust, and to dust all return” (Eccles. 3:20). Like the earth itself, the humble person is lowly. The person of humility is—literally and figuratively—grounded. Thus, humility is the recognition that we are all human—another word that comes from the same root—and that none of us are God. Remembering our position as earthly creatures who are not gods is the essence of humility. The virtue of humility, most simply defined, is an accurate assessment of oneself. And, of course, it is impossible to assess oneself rightly apart from God.

While the definition of humility is simple, achieving this accurate assessment of oneself is not easy. . . . And if knowing oneself is not already difficult enough (indeed, even impossible given the deceitful nature of the human heart), true humility requires not only an understanding of oneself but also an understanding of objective reality outside of oneself. As Josef Pieper explains, “The ground of humility is man’s estimation of himself according to the truth.”<sup>2</sup>

### ***Humble like Christ?***

In today’s passage from Philippians, Paul urges the Philippian Christians to be of one mind with each other and to strive to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. As we read on, we see what Paul means; even a cursory glance at verses 6-8 of the Christ-hymn (6-11) reveals the answer. Jesus set aside his equality with God. He emptied and humbled himself. He was obedient even to the point of death on a cross.

This is about as hard a teaching as they come. It would be nice if, after urging us to have the same mind as Jesus, Paul had given us a few rules to follow or some thoughts on Christian ethics. Instead, we get a call to utter and complete humility wrapped up in a big dose of theology.

Philippians is filled with Paul’s teachings about how the disciples of Jesus Christ are to live – be selfless, stay humble, pray about everything, be content in all things, think about what is true and good and honorable and

---

<sup>2</sup> Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. With this series coming to an end, I heartily recommend that you pick up a copy of Swallow’s book, especially if you enjoy literature. Swallow looks at the virtues in the context of great books (or vice versa!). She might inspire you to read some of the great works you’ve missed.

excellent, and so on. Yet, in this Christ-hymn there seems to be no moral teachings at all, no “do’s and don’ts.” We are ready for Paul to tell us why we ought to be selfless – and all we get is verse after verse of theology! Jesus was “in the form of God” . . . Jesus “emptied himself” . . . Jesus was “found in human form” . . . all this theology. But this is Paul’s way. When Christians brought Paul a practical question, he was likely to give them a theological answer. The Corinthians came to Paul with questions about eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols – and he began his answer with this: “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:9). Paul understood that we cannot separate what we believe from what we do. He forces us to hold together our theology and our morality. We seek the truth about God and ourselves, but always in the service of discipleship. So, after calling the Philippians to selflessness, Paul reminds them of Christ’s selflessness and all that he willingly surrendered for us.

How does God respond to Jesus’ “obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross”? God does so triumphantly, exalting Jesus above all others. Jesus is Lord. It is he to whom “every knee should bend” and “every tongue confess.”

### ***Embracing humility***

Humiliation, surrendering our rights and privileges, obedience, death – who wants that? We want to win, achieve, triumph, succeed. We want more rights, more privileges. We’ve earned them! We deserve them. We want it here and now.

This is the sin of the so-called “Health and Wealth gospel.” Prosperity preachers promise full bank accounts and healthy bodies in exchange for belief (and a large donation). Yet, Paul points us in a completely different direction. The Christian path is about humility and obedient faithfulness; further, we should expect that faithfulness to take us down the way of suffering. Perhaps this is why wealth in the gospels is not about reward but warning.

So, the question to us is whether we will welcome Paul’s challenge to have the mind of Christ, even if it looks like losing. Certainly, to those in Jerusalem on a Friday two thousand years ago, it looked like Jesus had lost to the chief priests and Pilate.

Will we strive each day to be obedient? Will we seek to learn what God desires from us? Will we rise to the challenge of our own God-given vocation? Will we regard others, all others, as better than ourselves, putting aside selfish ambition and conceit (2:4)? Will we put the interests of others ahead of our own, even if it means we “lose” (2:5)? Will we embrace the humility of obedient faith?