

Living By Faith And Humility

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The author of Hebrews writes:

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:12-13)

In this series, which is covering elements necessary to provide a firm foundation for consistently living by faith, we have seen that, first and foremost, we must have a solid perception that, not only does God exist, but He is absolutely supreme in ruling over His creation. Not only is He supreme in power, authority, and intelligence, but He is also supreme in all the attributes of His character: in love, wisdom, mercy, kindness, patience, goodness, purpose, etc. Finally, He is supreme in His plan for working it all out, even to the point that His awareness of each of us is also supreme.

The book of Hebrews focuses on Christ's greatness. For example, it shows that He is greater than Moses, Joshua, and Aaron. The comparisons with these great figures from the past are drawn in part to enable us to compare His greatness with our deficiencies and needs. This is important because, from these comparisons, we receive guidance in locating our proper place in our relationship with Him.

We must answer to Him for our conduct. In the previous article, we found that, in attempting to meet that responsibility, we are by nature resistant to Him. We resist submission to Him, and this resistance is generated by our pride. The Bible has much to say about pride, and it is almost totally bad.

Psalms 73 associates pride and evil as so closely related that they go together like hand and glove. In fact, it uses the illustration that pride is like an ornament around the wicked person's neck, as though he wears it proudly. The Bible says so much about the connection between pride and evil that overcoming it seems to be an impossible task.

Pride's influence is in us because of contact with the evil spirits inhabiting this world and with the systems that they have created. Nevertheless, as the previous article concluded, we began to see that pride is neutralized by humility. Yet, unlike pride, humility does not come naturally; it must, in the Bible's terminology, be "put on" (Colossians 3:12). It must be added to our character by means of God's Spirit and *consistent, conscious decisions* to submit to God because we love Him, because we are sincerely seeking to be like Him, and because we greatly desire to glorify Him.

In this manner, by God's power and our cooperation, humility is *created* as part of our character, enabling us to grow stronger toward overcoming pride's evil influences. In this article, we will explore humility as part of the chain of elements necessary to supply support for us to live by faith.

One Is Absorbed, One Is Created

Because of exposure to Satan and this world, pride is within us almost from birth. Humility is most definitely not that way but is a created attribute of character. A carnal humility can be created within a child living under the supervision of loving parents who are making the effort to train their children in good character qualities. In like manner, spiritual humility is most definitely a developed characteristic because of contact with God and our willing cooperation. James 4:6-10 asserts:

But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Once we understand some of the Bible's instruction regarding spiritual humility, this clear series of *commands* becomes important. They must be commanded because these actions are not natural to human nature and because the pride dwelling within us is so strong and influential.

Humbling ourselves is commanded just as surely as resisting the Devil, cleansing our hands, purifying our hearts, lamenting, mourning, and weeping. This means that humbling ourselves in submission to God is a choice that can—indeed, must—be exercised. Humility is important enough that God repeats this command briefly in Proverbs 3:34 and in I Peter 5:5-6.

Humility is dealt with somewhat differently in each testament, but at the same time, there is a tight similarity between the two treatments. In the Old Testament, it is shown less as a good quality of an honorable person's character than as a condition or situation an individual finds himself in because of poverty, affliction, or persecution. In this approach, a humble person is one in a humble circumstance.

In other words, the humble person has been brought low in a social sense. This perspective provides an understandable illustration that visibly portrays the more important spiritual attitude of the heart. People in a humble circumstance project degrees of attitude and conduct that may even approach obsequiousness. Obsequiousness is portrayed to an extreme in the movie *Lord of the Rings*, when the conniving counselor, Wormtongue, is confronted and embarrassingly corrected by Gandalf.

To be obsequious is to be perceived as excessively obedient, servile, or even groveling, as illustrated in Proverbs 22:7: "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender." The borrower has put himself or has been put into a position of dependence upon the whims or good graces of the lender, so he must bend his will to the one with the power. Liberties that he formerly had are lost. He cannot act as he pleases. He now feels obligated and constrained to a degree that he was not before.

As his outlook on life narrows, the borrower makes sure he treats the lender with deference. He certainly does not want to ruffle the lender's feathers, as he wants to be able to retain what he still has left of his former dignity. Thus, as his circumstance diminishes, the borrower almost automatically becomes beggarly to some degree, perhaps even fawning in his mannerisms. In most cases, there is a loss of enthusiasm and confidence about life. Being humbled changes the way a person approaches life.

Thus, the manner in which the Old Testament illustrates humility provides a mental picture of what the term means to a Christian's approach to life. This is good. However, we must understand that the

Old Testament in no way considers humility as weakness or bad. It just does not emphasize or portray it as the New Testament does.

A Positive Matter of the Heart

How does the New Testament present humility? According to commentator William Barclay, the classical Greek language did not even have a word for humility that included no sense of shame. The root of the word the apostles used literally means "to depress," a very expressive word. To the Greeks, humility indicated servility and slavishness. This may have been because Greeks looked down upon anyone who acted in humility as not being an upstanding person of good character. Culturally, it was evil, shameful behavior, as to them it exhibited someone untrustworthy. At best, they would consider the person to be a wimp because they admired people who aggressively took charge, commanding others about.

The Christian approach is entirely different. We will consider a few scriptures that give a description of the way humility enhances one's character.

Psalms 113:4-7: "For He is high above the nations; His glory is far greater than the heavens. Who can be compared with God enthroned on high? Far below Him are heavens and the earth; He stoops to look, and lifts the poor from the dirt" (*The Living Bible*).

Psalms 138:6: "Yet though He is so great, He respects the humble, but proud men must keep their distance" (*The Living Bible*).

Both of these psalms picture God as being of awesome power, but He holds His power in check to achieve a greater good. Rather than destroy through imperious self-centeredness, He pities and builds with gentle, understanding kindness.

Matthew 20:25-28 shows New Covenant leadership: "But Jesus called them to Himself and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.'"

Matthew 11:29 makes Jesus' insistence on humility exceedingly clear: "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Matthew 11:29 is a direct command from the same God described in Psalms, though here He is acting as a Man. His example and commands regarding this continues to be the way Christians are to follow.

Humility is not a weak, cringing approach to life. It is not a denial of power but the deliberate controlling of power to accomplish a greater good. It comes into proper use when a converted person deliberately utilizes a servant approach rather than a natural, proud, and carnal human-ruler approach.

It is the attitude that best promotes good relationships because it neutralizes pride and the damage it can wreak. At the very least, it indicates modesty that grows from a genuine self-evaluation that concludes in the person deeming himself worthless in relation to God and His truth.

An Important Self-Evaluation

It is important that we understand self-evaluation better. In the Christian sense of humility, the person is not deeming himself worthless because he sees himself as a vile creature full of sin—though to some degree this is true in comparison to God—but because he is merely a creature, absolutely dependent upon God even for every breath of air. Further, he views himself as possessing nothing intrinsically good, having to receive all good, spiritual things from God as well. Even Jesus had this attitude, and He is our model.

In Matthew 5:3, He states, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We can gauge how important this quality is to our relationship with God by considering its setting. It appears in the Sermon on the Mount, three whole chapters in which Jesus lays out before His followers the foundational teaching that, if followed, will work to produce a good relationship with God. The foundation of the foundation, we might say, is the Beatitudes, and the very first quality He presents, implying its prime necessity, is poverty of spirit.

Poverty of spirit is the diametric opposite of the haughty, competitive, self-assertive, self-sufficient arrogance of pride that says, "This is the way *I* see it." Being poor in spirit has absolutely nothing to do with being hard up in one's circumstances—in fact, it has nothing to do with the physical realm. It is a fundamental part of the spiritual realm, of which God and the purity of His attitudes, character, and truths are the central elements.

"Poor in spirit" is poverty as compared to God's qualities. It is poverty in terms of Holy Spirit. It is to be destitute in regard to the fruit and power of God's Holy Spirit of which we all desperately need. This attitude is the product of self-evaluation in which a person, comparing his own to God's spiritual qualities, finds himself utterly impoverished of any virtue of value to eternal life. Not only that, he finds himself utterly unable, powerless, to help himself to become like God.

Thus, a person who is poor of spirit clearly sees and appreciates his dependence on God both physically and spiritually. Humility is a fruit of the realization of his complete dependence. He is nothing in his own eyes and knows that his proper place is face down in the dust before God.

The apostle John writes in I John 5:4-5, "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." The honest recognition of need, the desire to glorify God, and the practice of overcoming leads a called-out one to live by faith.

Jesus Christ is the One that God has assigned to oversee and empower us. He is the Helper and Advocate (I John 2:1) who goes alongside, enabling us to be created in His image. From Him, we draw spiritual strength, and He gives grace to the humble.

King David writes in Psalm 39:5, ". . . every man at his best state is but vapor." This certainly confirms our spiritual need, but notice what he writes in Psalm 40:16-17 so that we can more clearly see our need:

Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; let such as love Your salvation say continually, "The Lord be magnified!" But I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinks upon me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.

Why is this so important? Remember the borrower standing, hat in hand, before the lender. Can we see the dependence expressed in David's words, that he is "poor and needy"? A person of this spiritual attitude will seriously and soberly listen to our great Creator and Benefactor, submit to Him, and benefit from so doing.

Examples of Self-Evaluation

A large number of pointed examples in Scripture will help us evaluate our attitude and character flaws, if we do it honestly. Carefully examine the following:

Luke 18:13-14: "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This episode reveals the importance of an honest awareness and admission of one's flaws.

Luke 15:18-19: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"

The prodigal son confesses his worthlessness and willingness to take his punishment.

I Kings 3:7-8: "Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted."

At this time in his life, Solomon clearly understood his limitations.

Isaiah 6:5-7: "Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said; 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.'"

Isaiah clearly compared his foul humanity against God's pure holiness and confessed his desperate need.

Philippians 3:8-9: "But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith."

Paul's evaluation of his own righteousness against Christ's left him spiritually poverty-stricken.

Deuteronomy 8:3: "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord."

God clearly declares that He sometimes puts His children through difficult and unfamiliar afflictions to make plain to us what we need from Him.

II Chronicles 12:11-12: "And whenever the king entered the house of the Lord, the guard would go and bring them out; then they would take them back to the guardroom. When he humbled himself, the wrath of the Lord turned from him, so as not to destroy him completely; and things also went well in Judah."

Many kings of Israel and Judah failed to perceive the connection between humility before God and His blessing. In this episode, Rehoboam reacted well enough to please God, but all too often, other kings failed to perceive their impending doom in warfare and did not humble themselves to call on Him in their need.

Jesus Shows His Dependence

Despite His great gifting as revealed by the many miracles He performed for people's benefit, Jesus openly expressed His dependence on God several times. He often deferred to the Father, making clear to those truly following Him that God was supplying the power. John 5:18-19, 30 records an instance of this:

Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. . . . I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me."

Here, Jesus immediately knocks down the claim that He had elevated Himself as equal to God by showing His dependence on God. Though He later claims that He and the Father are one (John 10:30), that oneness does not include absolute equality. Rather, He is showing that because of Their oneness, there is perfect communication between Them, with the Father leading the way by showing Him what to do. Jesus humbly claims no absolute equality with the Father but dependence, despite His doing fantastic things like walking on water, healing, and resurrecting a number of people. John 8:26-28 confirms His dependence:

"I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him." They did not understand that He spoke to them of the Father. Then Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then You will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things."

In this context, He clearly ties His verbal dependence to the Father to the things He said to them. Then in verse 29, He again points to the perfect cooperation between the two. Jesus is perfectly submissive, and the Father is perfectly responsive.

John 14:8-10 is a clincher:

Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father?' Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works."

Commentators believe Phillip is requesting a theophany, a literal vision of the Father. Jesus refuses with a gentle rebuke, confirming once again His oneness with the Father, and that if one has seen the Son, he has seen spiritual character exactly as if he had seen the Father. His humility again comes to the fore in His claim that He does not speak on His own authority and that His Father does the works. As a human being, Jesus had absolutely no evil pride coursing through Him or interfering with His thoughts.

John the Baptist is another servant of God who clearly understood his dependence on Him. John 3:25-27, 30 provides this example:

Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. . . . He must increase, but I must decrease."

For a person to be humble, he has to understand and fully accept the realization that came from John's innermost being. If he does not, pride will arise and muzzle humility by means of a character weakness. Here, John's disciples feel a measure of jealousy because more people were being attracted to Jesus, and the number of John's disciples was dwindling. John's reply to them is one of wisdom. He understands that God assigns a place in the outworking of His purpose to everyone He calls. John knows and accepts that he had no right to lay claim to an honor that had not been given to him from heaven. Instead of envying Jesus' success, John rejoices that both men's purposes were being fulfilled.

God's Response to Humility

True humility cannot be faked for very long. It will always be revealed even to other people by whether one consistently submits to God. However, the great Creator God who looks on the heart knows immediately. It is a quality of great value. God openly expresses His pleasure in those who humble themselves before Him. Why? Because it not only glorifies Him through the way that they live, but it is also very rewarding to those who do so.

In Isaiah 66:1-2, God plainly states that humility attracts His attention:

Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand

has made, and all those things exist," says the Lord. "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word."

It is not at all unusual for men to desire and build beautiful and costly edifices to honor God and to worship within them. However, God makes clear that He prefers to be revered and communed with within the hearts of men. This gets His positive attention, motivating Him to respond in loving kindness. When this occurs, it cannot be anything but good for those who humbly seek Him.

Is any statement regarding humility's value more clearly rewarding than James 4:6-7, 10?

But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. . . . Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Salvation is by grace through faith. It is also the key to all obedience and growth in God's way of life. Can anything be more valuable? Humility is a key to obtaining it as a gift from God.

One more passage from the Old Testament will help to show God's favorable and warm respect for the humble person:

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, and the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6-8)

Notice carefully the comparisons Micah uses to illustrate the value of humility in God's eyes, especially the ascending value of each illustration. Calves for sacrifices are in the plural, indicating more than one sacrifice at a time when even one calf would have been an offering of considerable monetary value. A thousand rams might be what a king would offer. Obviously, so many rams are a very valuable gift, but we should already be asking ourselves, "Is this the right way to impress God?" Ten thousand rivers of olive oil would equal the value of the offerings of many kings of many nations. Does that meet the standard God sets? One's own firstborn is without doubt the most precious gift of all. Yet, again, the implication is that this is not what God wants.

What follows is one of the truly great statements in the entire Bible. Micah names three great acts of love for God and fellow man that pave the way for a good relationship with Him: 1) To be righteous and absolutely fair to all regardless of their status in life. 2) To show kindness freely and willingly to others. 3) To live humbly in conscious fellowship of the greatness and sovereignty of God. These three actions will work to glorify God so that He enables those acting thus to neutralize their pride.

Our service to God should not be given to Him with the primary purpose to "get" things selfishly from Him. Our purpose should always be to honor and glorify Him through what He is doing in our lives. Nevertheless, God is most certainly not against providing us with wonderful gifts as we humbly submit to Him with pure motives.

I Kings 3:10-13 provides us with an outstanding example from Solomon's life:

The speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. Then God said to him: "Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you. I have also given you what you have not asked: both riches and honor, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days."

Solomon humbly asked for help to honor God in judging the people of Israel, and he was rewarded with riches and honor.

Proverbs 22:4 also promises riches and honor, as well as life, to the humble individual, but II Chronicles 7:14 promises two additional and immensely important benefits to everyone seeking a humble relationship with God: forgiveness and the hearing of our prayers. "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

Godly humility is not difficult to understand, but it is difficult to accomplish because of human nature's ever-present resistance to our great Creator and Savior. This quality requires us to be constantly aware of the need to glorify God, and the fear of God is a necessary and complementary element to help keep us aware.

Among other characteristics in which God is supreme is judgment, so we must also seriously consider His sense of justice. God's justice helps us to perceive the reality that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The next issue's article will explore our need to understand that God means exactly what He says, even though He may at times say it symbolically.