

On Choosing Humility

D E Wasake Esq.

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Basics

How do you deal with a topic like humility when you feel you are “not there yet”?

Start

You follow what Paul did: *“Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead...for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”*.ⁱ



This is the call of every Christian, not to spiral downwards into a vicious whirlpool of sin but like Robertson McQuilkin shows: as you “Spiral upwards”ⁱⁱ towards holiness and as you wrestle with your earthly nature, putting pride to death dailyⁱⁱⁱ, you slowly by slowly start becoming like Christ:

Grow



“I am humble and gentle in heart. I will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle.”^{iv}

Mature

How did early Christians deal with humility?

In our generation today, we don’t seem to take humility as serious as the early Christians, those brothers of ours who are part of the great cloud of witnesses watching us^v

See some examples of how they did this: ^{vi}

The desert fathers (c. 305 AD). When Christianity became the “official” religion under the emperor Constantine and Christians no longer got persecuted, it lost its authenticity. Most people paid it lip service (for example because you needed to be a Christian to become a high ranking official). As a result, desert fathers like Anthony sought poverty, asceticism (self-denial), sleep deprivation, simplicity as part of their pursuit of “real” Christianity.

Monastic living (from c. 483 AD). When the desert experience (above) became lonely, monasteries were born (a student and teacher/master relationship). Monks commonly took 3 vows: Poverty, Chastity (sexual abstinence) and obedience. Its objectives being to confront the 3 most intense human temptations – materialism, lust and arrogance (pride and position).

The Franciscans (c. 1209 AD). Francis of Assisi, following on from the monastic living era built humility into his order starting with their clothing (called a “habit”) which at the time looked like children’s clothing and so looked really ridiculous. As a result, it caused them to be ridiculed (people would hurl abuse and perhaps even rocks at them).

They however valued/accepted ridicule as a means of building humility! Ridicule in their view created an authentic Christian experience. It seems as you can see, for a large part of the early church, humility was synonymous with the Christian life. These guys took humility so serious they found it necessary to go to these great lengths (living in a desert) to have an authentic Christian life.

They seemed to have grasped the full magnitude of what the bible says about God’s attitude to pride: *“God is opposed to the proud and haughty but continually gives the gift of grace to the humble.”*^{vii}

What’s happened to our generation today? Why is it that we are for example so taken up by the prosperity gospel where the early Christians focussed on poverty as a means of learning humility?

How do we recapture some of the lessons lost there?

Examples from the bible

1. Acts of service teach humility. Jesus being God humbled himself and washed the disciples' feet. ^{viii}. When did you last use your own hands to serve others and not just give "a love gift of \$10 or more?"

When did you get down into the dirty trenches of Christian service to actually go out and minister to the needs of others - the hungry, those without water, those who are refugees and strangers in a foreign land, those in hospital and those in prison? ^{ix}

2. Fasting teaches humility. The bible shows that we humble ourselves by fasting^x.

While food being a good thing is of course from God, we as Christians need to realise that being full and contented can also make you forget that man does actually live on bread alone (food) ^{xi}but is sustained by every word that is in the bible (the word of God which proceeds from his mouth).

Fasting was commanded by Jesus (saying when not if)^{xii}. God knew that in the process of praying and fasting our hearts are softened and as pride is removed, we indeed realise like Jesus did at the end of his fast - our security does not come from material things (like food, clothing, shelter) but from God.

3. Choosing humility results in humility. This is an odd one, but the ancients I spoke about above got it. They understood that in the process of going hungry, being poor, serving others, being ridiculed you eventually became humble. Let me have someone else explain it better than me as follows:

"If you're getting proud, you must repent. That means you change your mind. You go from thinking one way about your life to thinking another way. Why repent? Humility is a choice. We're never told in Scripture to pray for God to make us humble. It's something you choose for yourself. The Bible says, "So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honour" (1 Peter 5:6 NLT). Here's the difference between pride and humility. Pride is when I accept the credit for things that God and other people did through me and for me. Humility doesn't mean thinking of yourself less. It means thinking of others and God more. "^{xiii}

Humility why are you so hard?!

Choosing humility is so challenging! Our natural condition is to be proud, to get even.

But we must remember that we don't want to oppose God. The Lord hates everyone who is arrogant and won't let them go unpunished. ^{xiv}

It seems in Judaism, it is pride that is considered the root of all evil, not money. One former pastor explains it excellently^{xv} including pointing out that Pride led to Satan's downfall (he wanted to take the place of God) and pride likewise led to Adam and Eve's down fall (they wanted to be like God).

So in obedience, we choose not to become conceited so as not to fall into condemnation like Satan ^{xvi}and instead choose to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand, tough as it is.

You have a fight with your spouse. You both believe you are right but remember that the bible says "the sun must not go down when you are still angry"^{xvii}. So with gritted teeth you choose to humble yourself and say "Sorry honey, I shouldn't have said that". She then surprises you with a warm hug

and she also says “sorry darling, I too shouldn’t have said that too” .. and now you are both as free as a bird. Full of joy!

You have a work colleague who is so annoying! They somehow manage to press all your buttons at the same time. They are always picking on you, disagreeing with you, deliberately provoking you. Then you remember that Jesus said: “do good to those who hate you^{xviii}”, so you choose to humble yourself and walk up to them to say “that was a really nice document you prepared”. They look at you shocked, but the next morning offer to make you a cup of tea. Healing has come in the morning on the Lord’s wings!

Your turn

What will you now do differently? Examples to think about include:

- What physical acts shall you perform to help you learn to become more humble?
- What else can you find out about the ancient Christians and humility?
- Pride is cunning. It creeps upon on you when you least expect. How will you remind yourself daily about putting it to death? Have you repented of pride today?
- Read the [full article on pride the root of all evil here](#).
- Do you want to learn more about fasting? [Find an article on fasting here](#).

Write here

Notes

ⁱ Philippians 3: 13-14 (NKJV)

ⁱⁱ Robertson McQuilkin, Life in the Spirit, Broadman & Holman (2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ Paraphrase from Colossians 3: 5

^{iv} Paraphrase from Matthew 11: 29 and Isaiah 42: 3 (NLT)

^v Hebrews 12: 1

^{vi} Taken from speaking lectures by Dr. Gary Thomas “An overview of Christian Spirituality” as on biblicaltraining.org

^{vii} James 4: 6 (AMP)

^{viii} John 13: 1

^{ix} Extract from Matthew 25: 35 – 37

^x Psalm 69: 10 (GNT)

^{xi} Matthew 4: 4

^{xii} Mathew 6: 16

^{xiii} <https://pastorrick.com/devotional/english/full-post/humility-is-a-choice/>

^{xiv} Proverbs 16:5 (GNT)

^{xv} <https://shawnethomas.com/2011/07/24/the-root-of-all-evil/>

^{xvi} Taken from 1 Timothy 3: 6

^{xvii} Paraphrase from Ephesians 4: 26

^{xviii} Luke 6: 27 (NIV)