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Holiness and Humility

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When rightly understood, there is a surprisingly close relationship between

holiness and humility

By Wilber Alexander
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THE devoted men of a religious order were meeting in a year-end business session and retreat to report the past year's progress and to encourage one another spiritually. Appointed delegates from groups within the order spoke of the advances their own group had made in membership growth, financial gain, charity performed, and persons helped. As the delegates finished their reports it appeared that each succeeding group had made gains above the others.

Then the spokesman for the last group rose to give his report. As he read each statistic he apologized for the fact that although each member of his group had worked diligently to carry out well-laid plans, the figures revealed meager results. At the close of his report he commended the other groups and then said, "There is one thing we have accomplished this year above the other brethren. We have been tops in humility."

Of all the Christian virtues humility is one of the most desirable. At the same time it is one of the most difficult to understand and exemplify.

The practice of this noble virtue takes countless forms. We have seen humility in terms of dress—the sackcloth and ashes of the Pharisee, the rags of the mendicant monk, the simplicity and modesty of cut and pattern in clothes for modern Christian groups. Such bodily attitudes as kneeling, crawling, or prostration suggest humility. We are sympathetic toward the publican with bowed head and smitten breast. We hold in contempt the proud Pharisee. Attitudes of self-depreciation and of self-negation are often considered evidences of humility. Nothing in the words of a humble person suggests self-reference, but rather a studied minimizing of any personal accomplishments.

Pilgrimages, isolation, menial labors, all appeal to humble men. This attitude may be carried to the point of deliberate subjection to ridicule and punishment. In one of the suburbs of Los Angeles a few years ago observers could see a man walking down the streets with a sign on his back that read, "I'm a fool for Jesus Christ. Whose fool are you?"

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WILLIAM HUTCHINSON, ARTIST

The Roman centurion demonstrated the true spirit of humility.

Humility thus practiced has been soul satisfying to some and very frustrating to others. Some people walk benignly through life, apparently happiest in their humility when it assumes its lowest lowliness. Those critical of Christianity look at its meekness, obedience, compassion, forgiveness, and especially its humility as evidence of weakness.

To the questioning mind humility seems an enigma. Even with relative freedom as it relates to God's sovereignty, should not man be able to express his personality, his potentialities, as they really are to demonstrate whatever talents or excellencies he possesses through heredity and disciplined achievement? How can a person excel if he must continually minimize himself? How can humility be identified? What behavior must be evidenced? What norms must be met before one can say, "This is humility"? How does one evaluate the humility of his humility?

Could not a person be self-deceived in humility and have in fact an insidious pride? Would not the achievement of any high degree of humility be difficult to claim without feelings of self-satisfaction, feelings of pride of ownership? Is it possible for a Christian to be able to say he is a born-again, saved saint and still be humble? Since most men feel somewhat inferior much of the time, in the face of naturally imposed human limitations would not self-depreciation be devastating?

The answers to these and other questions on humility find their answer in the life of the lowliest of men, the Man called Jesus Christ. Writing to the Philippian believers Paul points to Christ's example. "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:1-8, R.S.V.).

The earthly life of Jesus is the clearest index to what God approves in human thinking and living. We are familiar with the Lord's condescension in leaving riches, splendor, honor, and glory to take up a life of humility, poverty, even shame. We appreciate the fact that Jesus did not attempt to dazzle human senses with a display of outward show, but came to us as a humble man, unassuming and approachable, dedicated to living for others. We cherish the thought that He had no opportunities or advantages the poorest do not have, that He knew toil, hardship, and deprivation daily. We sense something of the humility He demonstrated on the cross.

What we possibly miss or fail to remember is the other side of His humility. Combined with His chosen low estate and His unpretentious attitudes was a stately power that awed men while they loved Him. Although He walked in lowliness He moved with nobility and dignity. His humility was not made up of a low estimate of His own character and qualifications. He desired to develop and use all He had to bring meaning into other lives. He was conscious of who He was and what He had, and He gave it all away. He was totally absorbed in His mission for mankind.

His humility lay in His acknowledgment of His state in life and in subjecting it all to the will of the Father for the blessing of others. He felt no need to assert Himself. Free from constant self-reference He rested secure in the love of the Father and in the acceptance of His own strength and limitations.

No one had to look for humility in Him or try to define it. They knew it was there in abundance and in balance. One writer sums up this perfect humility thus: When one looked at Jesus he saw "ardent zeal and inexhaustible patience, noble fervour and indulgent leniency, holy seriousness and sunny cheerfulness, an impulse to solitude and yet world publicity, majestic greatness and deepest humility, inflexible determination and sweetest gentleness, powerful energy and quiet self-possession, warmest love for sinners, and invincible hatred of sin, compassionate sympathy and strictest justice; irresistible attractiveness and fearless frankness, incorruptible truthfulness and extreme forbearance, mildness and force, resignation and resistance, adamant strength and motherly tenderness, indefatigable outward activity and inward contemplation, ceaseless striving to promote the kingdom of heaven." Thus Paul appeals, "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5, R.S.V.).

A lecture given by an American specialist in aeronautical medicine contains the statement that if measured by the tasks man faces in space travel, from a biological point of view man is a misconstruction. The blunt frankness and intent of this statement says that the body given us by the Creator, with its sensitive circulatory system and its more sensitive nervous system, is no longer equal to the possibilities opened to it by man's technical intelligence. This is man saying to God, "Man must be biologically rebred." The human organism must be modernized to catch up with man's ingenuity.

We place such an attitude at one end of a continuum and label it pride. At the other end of the continuum we place humility and we say of it: "As the lark that soars the highest builds her nest the lowest; as the nightingale that sings so sweetly sings in the shade when all things rest; as the branches that are most laden with fruit bend lowest; as the ship most laden sinks deepest in the water, so the holiest Christians are the humblest."

"Be Silent"

By MABEL E. BROOKS

Be silent when you hear of things
That make you feel indignant.
Be silent when the things you hear
May even seem malignant.

Be silent till you find the time
To spend an hour in prayer
To cast your burden on the Lord,
By faith to leave it there.

There is so much of mischief done
By speaking out our mind;
So often thoughtless things we say
Are not so very kind.

To leave all judgment to the Lord
Will always prove the best;
So wisdom is to leave all things
In Christ's dear hands to rest.

How can mortal man be moved from pride to godly humility? Jesus invites, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30, R.S.V.). He simply bids, "Come to Me; take My yoke; learn from Me; rest." Jesus is saying through these words of invitation that humility is never independent of God's grace and power at work in the human heart. Nor is it independent of human choice and exercise. Humility is an active principle growing out of an increasing consciousness of our relationship to God.

This implies the need for an intelligent understanding of the nature of God and the nature of man. Ignorance does not increase the humility or the spirituality of any Christian. "The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian."—*Testimonies,* vol. 3, p. 160. An intelligent knowledge of God requires implicit belief in God's Word and a willingness to be influenced by it.

Humility begins with a sense of the power and wisdom of God and our inability to comprehend His greatness. We must acknowledge that God is God and man is man. If a man beholds the glory of the God of heaven as He is revealed to humanity and realizes the character of God, he will become aware of the contrast between himself and God and be led to the self-knowledge that leads to humility. Such a self-knowledge can lead man to conviction, repentance, confession, and the new birth.

Advancement in Christian experience beyond conversion is characterized by increasing humility as the result of increasing knowledge and fellowship through the Holy Spirit. The nearer we get to heaven the more sinful we shall appear in our own eyes. This does not mean that we are more sinful, but that we recognize what separates us from God.

While we are sure of salvation (cf. 1 John 5:13) we remember how we are saved and what remains to be done to make our lives a pageant of triumph. Knowing this we are humble.

The Christian life is a disciplined existence. Jesus says, "Take my yoke," and He lays on us a yoke lined with love, a yoke of creaturely dependence, a yoke of obedience, a yoke of service. By beholding, by surrendering, we are changed to live as our Lord lived. We are conscious of our estate in life, conscious of our strengths and limitations, and yet we walk in the dignity of our nature. We are not flattered by praise nor threatened by censure, because we are secure in Christ. Knowing ourselves we recognize the dignity and worth of others. Appreciating ourselves for who and what we are we give our lives away in love and in joy.

Humility is holiness, hence by God's grace every man, woman, and child can be "tops" in humility.