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TRUE HUMILITY

Romans 12:3

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Romans Lesson 78

True Humility Romans 12:3

In 1985, the great baseball pitcher Tom Seaver was on the verge of winning his 300th game, which few pitchers have done. He went over to his 9-year-old daughter in the box seats and said excitedly, "Three more outs to go!" She responded, "Good, then we can go home and go swimming." (*Newsweek*, 1/20/1992, p. 47)

Our kids have a way of keeping us humble, don't they! And humility is a virtue that we all need to grow in. Three times in Romans 11 (11:18, 20, 25) Paul warned against pride. He brings it up again here (12:3). He will mention it again indirectly in 12:10 ("give preference to one another in honor") and directly in 12:16 ("do not be haughty in mind"). Pride is the underlying sin in his rebuke in 14:4 & 10, "Who are you to judge the servant of another? ... But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt?" Paul was concerned that his readers grow in humility.

For centuries the Christian church has listed pride as one of the seven deadly sins, which also include wrath, greed, sloth, lust, envy, and gluttony. But since psychology flooded into the American evangelical church in the 1970's, we've been inundated with books that tell us that we need to grow in self-esteem, which seems at odds with humility. One of the most prominent promoters of this supposed "virtue" is Robert Schuller. In *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* [Word, 1982], which was mailed unsolicited and without charge to almost every pastor in America, he wrote (p. 57),

In my lectures to thousands of ordained clergy of the widest cross section of historic Christianity, I have found it necessary to tell my colleagues, "Dare to be a possibility thinker! Do not fear pride; the easiest job God has is to humble us. God's almost impossible task is to keep us believing every hour of every day how great we are as his sons and daughters on planet earth."

If we should not fear pride, why does James 4:6 warn, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble"? Why does God promise (Isa. 66:2b), "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word"? If we shouldn't fear pride, why does Proverbs 16:18 warn, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling"? Why does Paul warn (1 Cor. 10:12), "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"? Since Satan's original sin was that his heart was lifted up (Ezek. 28:17), seeking to make himself like the Most High (Isa. 14:14), and since pride is at the root of every sin that we commit, it would seem that we should fear pride and seek to grow in true humility.

Let's try to define humility. Vernon Grounds wrote (*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Merrill C. Tenney [Zondervan], 3:222), "It is the spontaneous recognition of the creature's absolute dependence on his Creator" He adds (3:223), "Humility is the logical corollary of sin-consciousness."

In one of the few books written on humility (*Humility: The Beauty of Holiness* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 12), Andrew Murray calls it "the place of entire dependence on God." He adds (p. 13, italics his), "Humility is not so much a grace or virtue along with others; it is the root of all, because it alone takes the right attitude before God, and allows Him as God to do all. . . . It is simply *the sense of entire nothingness, which comes when we see how truly God is all, and in which we make way for God to be all.*"

In his excellent little booklet, *From Pride to Humility* (rev. ed., excerpted from *The Exemplary Husband* [Focus Publications], p. 17), Stuart Scott says,

When someone is humble they are focused on God and others, not self. Even their focus on others is out of a desire to love and glorify God. . . . A humble person's goal is to elevate God and encourage others. In short, they "no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2 Cor. 5:15).

Then he offers this definition (p. 18): "The mindset of Christ (a servant's mindset): a focus on God and others, a pursuit of the

recognition and the exaltation of God, and a desire to glorify and please God in all things and by all things He has given."

Here's another helpful definition, from C. J. Mahaney (*Humility: True Greatness* [Multnomah], p. 22, italics his): "*Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness.*" He adds (*ibid.*), "Without an honest awareness of both these realities ... all self-evaluation will be skewed and we'll fail to either understand or practice true humility."

So we could sum up that true humility means seeing God as the giver and sustainer of everything and seeing ourselves as sinful and needy in His presence, so that we trust totally in Him and not in ourselves, so that He gets all the glory.

Paul ends Romans 11 with the great doxology (11:36), "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." God is the source and sustainer of all, and thus all glory is due to Him. Thus, in light of God's mercy to us as sinners (11:32), Paul urges us (12:1-2) to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. We are not to be conformed to this evil age, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we prove in practice God's good, acceptable, and perfect will.

It is significant that the first aspect of a renewed mind that Paul mentions is humility. Paul is describing for us how the renewed mind thinks. In the Greek text, Paul uses the verb "to think" or a compound of it four times. This shows us that humility (or pride) is a matter of how we think before God. Often we can see the attitudes and behavior of pride in others. But the point is, even if we can hide our pride from others, we cannot hide it from God. This is a mindset that we have to develop before Him, where we constantly judge our dependence on ourselves and affirm our gratitude toward Him and dependence on Him. As James 4:10 exhorts, "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you."

Also, Paul's emphasis in the following context is on loving relationships and he introduces that subject by confronting our pride and exhorting us to humility. Pride is at the root of all relational conflicts. Humility is the foundation for godly, loving relationships. We can see it in toddlers, who selfishly grab a toy, claiming, "That's

mine!" The other toddler fights back, trying to get what he thinks he has a right to play with. While we may grow more sophisticated in how we do it, all of our adult conflicts are rooted in this same self-centered pride. So when Paul says, "I say to everyone among you," he is emphasizing that this is not something that only a few of us need to work on. Pride is endemic to the fallen human heart. So in verse 3 Paul is telling us,

It is vital for each of us to develop true humility
in light of God's gracious gifts to us.

Paul outlines four steps to develop true humility:

1. To develop true humility, always keep God's grace in view.

Paul begins, "For through the grace given to me . . ." He is probably referring specifically to the grace that gave him the gift of apostleship (Rom. 1:5; 15:15-16; 1 Cor. 3:10; 15:9-10; Eph. 3:8). This means that what follows are not helpful hints for happy living, but rather apostolic commands. If we don't grow in humility, we are disobeying God. And, if anyone would be susceptible to pride, it would be those holding the office of apostle. But Paul was always keenly aware that he held this position by grace alone. (These two points are from Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 651.) Although the gift of apostle is no longer given, the principle still holds: the more prominent your gifts, the more you will be prone to pride, unless you remember that everything you are and have are from God's grace.

But I believe that Paul is also cognizant of the grace of salvation that he shares in common with all believers, which he has expounded on in Romans 1-11. As he has just said (11:32), "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all." If we are saved, it is because God was gracious to us. It was not a reward for our good behavior! If it had not been for God's grace, we would still be in our sins, headed for hell. And now that we are saved, whatever natural or spiritual gifts that we have are due to God's grace. As Paul chides the arrogant Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:7), "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?"

And so the foundation for true humility is always to keep God's grace in view. Keep coming back to the cross. Jesus didn't die for you because you were worthy and He knew that He was getting a real prize. John Newton put it rightly, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." By the way, years ago when the Biola choir sang "Amazing Grace" on Robert Schuller's "Hour of Power" TV show, he required that they take out the word "wretch" and sing, "That saved my soul for me"! You can't have high self-esteem if you call yourself a wretch!

2. To develop true humility, work on going lower, not higher.

The danger is not that we would think too lowly of ourselves, but too highly. Paul doesn't tell us that we need to build our self-esteem or our self-confidence in order to succeed. I've heard Christians say that the reason for their success is that they believe in themselves. But the Bible says that those who believe in themselves are cursed (Jer. 17:5). Our trust must always be in the Lord through us, not in ourselves (2 Cor. 3:5; Phil. 4:13). I've not been able to find a single instance in the Bible where the Lord tells someone who is bemoaning his weakness or inadequacy that he needs to start believing in himself.

Let's look at a few examples. In Genesis 18:27, Abraham is trying to get God to spare Sodom. He states, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes." The Lord doesn't respond by saying, "Come on, Abraham, you need to see how great you are as My chosen child!" He lets Abraham's self-deprecation stand.

Job had lost his possessions, his ten children, and his health. Then his so-called friends berate him for over 30 chapters. When God finally speaks, He spends two chapters (38 & 39) showing Job how little he knows and how powerless he is compared to God. Job responds (40:3-5), "Then Job answered the LORD and said, 'Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add nothing more.'" But the Lord doesn't comfort him or say, "Come on, Job, you're the most righteous man on the earth! Don't talk like that! Look at how great you are!" Rather, the Lord goes on putting Job in his place for two more chapters! Then

Job concludes (42:6), "Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes." That's where Job, the most righteous man on earth, needed to be. And it was only after that that the Lord restored him.

Note, also, Peter's response to the first miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:8), "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" Jesus didn't correct him by saying, "Come on, Rock! You need to think better things about yourself! Let's get rid of this worm theology stuff!" Rather, Jesus graciously focused on how He would change Peter (Luke 5:10), "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men." (Also, see Isa. 6:5; Dan. 9:4-19.)

If you can find any verses that tell us that we need to build our self-esteem or love ourselves more or think of ourselves more highly, I'd be glad to consider them. The second great commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39), is not commanding us to love ourselves more. Rather, it assumes that our innate self-love is the standard by which we should strive to love others. And while we should see ourselves as God's beloved children, identified with Jesus Christ and possessing His gracious gifts for service, these blessings are all due to His grace, not to something inherent in us. To develop true humility, we need to work on going lower, not higher (Rom. 12:16).

3. To develop true humility, remember that all that you have, including your faith, comes from God.

Paul says that we are "to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." Some argue that this refers to the faith necessary for justification, which God has given to all who are saved (Eph. 2:8-9). While it is true that saving faith comes from God, this doesn't fit with "allotted" or "measure," which indicate varying amounts.

In verse 4, Paul says that we all have different functions in the body. In verse 6, he says that "we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us," and that we are to exercise these gifts "according to the proportion of [our] faith." Thus it seems to me that in verse 3 Paul is talking about varying amounts of faith that God has given to different believers for the exercise of various spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 Paul says, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and

the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*." The point is, whether we have the gifts and faith to launch and sustain a worldwide ministry, or whether we exercise our gifts and faith on a small, local scale, keep in mind that everything you are and have comes from God, according to His sovereign purpose (1 Cor. 12:11).

This attitude eliminates pride. How can I boast when I am only doing what God has graciously enabled me to do? Although I've never read that he is a Christian, the billionaire Warren Buffet, who is reputed to be the second richest man in the world, refuses to take credit for his company, Berkshire's, success. He explains (*Reader's Digest*, 11/94, p. 175):

Much of our businesses' prosperity has been created by our managers. My role may best be illustrated by an incident at my granddaughter Emily's fourth-birthday party. Attending were other children, adoring relatives and a local entertainer named Beemer the Clown.

As Beemer began to perform magic tricks, he asked Emily to help him by waving a "magic wand" over "the box of wonders." Green handkerchiefs went into the box, Emily waved the wand, and Beemer removed blue ones. Loose handkerchiefs went in and, upon a magisterial wave by Emily, emerged knotted. Soon Emily was unable to contain herself. "Gee, I'm really good at this," she exulted.

And that sums up my contribution to the performance of Berkshire's businesses.

That should be our attitude as Christians when God grants blessing on our labors. We weren't ultimately responsible for the results. We were only using the gifts and faith that God gave us.

This attitude also checks us from comparing ourselves with others who may be more "successful" than we are. This is a common stumbling block for us pastors. We see another pastor with a bigger church or who is in demand around the world as a speaker or who has publishers asking for his books and we get jealous. Instead, if the man is preaching the gospel and teaching God's Word without compromise, we should rejoice. We're on the same team; we're members of the same body. If he is seeing fruit, it's for the

cause of Christ and for His glory. We should make sure that we are properly using the gifts that God has given to us. Then we can rejoice in someone else's greater gifts.

Thus to develop true humility, keep God's grace always in view. Work on going lower, not higher, in your estimate of yourself. Remember that all that you have, including your faith, comes from God and must be exercised as unto Him. Finally,

4. To develop true humility, determine what God has given you to do and seek to use it for His glory, trusting Him for the results.

Paul tells us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, "but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." He does not say that God has only allotted to *some* a measure of faith, but rather, to *each* one. Every text that mentions spiritual gifts emphasizes that we all have at least one gift (1 Cor. 12:7, 11; Eph. 4:7; 1 Pet. 4:10). The analogy of the church being the body of Christ underscores the point. Each part of the body is essential for the proper functioning of the whole. There are no parts of my body that I care to part with! I know that I can get along with one leg or arm or with one eye or one kidney. But I can only function at full capacity when all of the parts are there and doing what they're supposed to do.

People who go around dumping on themselves are not thinking with sound judgment, because they're denying that God has given them a gift to be used for His glory. In Jesus' parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), it wasn't the slave who received five talents or the one with two talents who buried them and didn't use them for his master's benefit. It was the slave who received one talent who buried it and received a scathing rebuke when the master returned. If you think that because you're not gifted as a public speaker or effective as an evangelist, your gift doesn't matter, you're in danger of imitating that one-talent slave. You're not thinking with "sound judgment," as God has allotted to you a measure of faith. If you don't evaluate yourself correctly, you may not use what God has given you for His purpose and glory, and you will face His displeasure when you stand before Him. You want to hear the Lord say (Matt. 25:21), "Well done, good and faithful slave. ... Enter into the joy of your master."

So try to figure out, perhaps with the help of trusted friends, what you can do for the Lord and get involved in doing it. There may be a learning curve, where you fail at first. You will probably catch criticism from other believers. It goes with the turf! Keep learning and growing and serving. Maybe the Lord will re-direct you into another type of service. However you serve, ask Him to use you in a way that is greater than you can ask or even think (Eph. 3:20). Ask Him for results that are disproportionately greater than human explanation can provide. Keep in mind Paul's words (2 Cor. 3:5), "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God."

Conclusion

As a pastor, I'm concerned because I see many Christians who do not think about these things with sound judgment. They do not evaluate what God has given them to do and then get on with doing it in faith with a view to giving an account someday to God. They know that the pastor will give an account someday for how he uses his gifts, but it never occurs to them that *they* will also give an account for the ministry that God has given them to do. And so we always seem to have a lot of ministry needs that go unmet.

In his classic, *The Training of the Twelve* ([Kregel], p. 180), A. B. Bruce observed, "The whole aim of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief end of man." As you know, God's glory should be our chief end. We glorify Him by serving Him with true humility in light of His gracious gifts to us.

Application Questions

1. Some argue: "Jesus valued me enough to die for me, so I should value myself." Why is this convoluted thinking?
2. How should a humble person respond when someone pays him a compliment for something he did well? Is it biblical humility to dump on ourselves?
3. How can we properly evaluate whether we are using our gifts to the full capacity that God intended? What criteria apply?
4. Think of a recent relational conflict that you were a part of. How would humility on your part have affected the outcome?

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