

Humility – Descending Into Greatness

²² After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. ²⁴ For John had not yet been thrown into prison. ²⁵ Then there arose a dispute between *some* of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" ²⁷ John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. ³⁰ He must increase, but I *must* decrease. ³¹ He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (John 3:22–36)

The passage we have just read is all about humility.

Maybe there is no word as misunderstood as the word humility. Maybe there is no idea as badly understood as the idea of being humble. I think if we asked the average group of Christians to define humility, we'd get some sort of negative definition: "Humility is not being boastful. Humility is not being proud." Or if we ask Christians to imagine a humble person imagine being humble we imagine a kind of shy, retiring attitude that acts like it is less than it is, speaks as if it is weaker than it is, with a faint hint of self-pity.

This is not humility; it is how our proud fleshly natures distort the idea of humility, because it does not come naturally to us. That's why we never get humility right when we try to be or act or look humble. Trying to appear like you're not trying to be noticed is rather contradictory. Trying to seem humble soon lands you in the paradox of being proud of being such a humble person. When you try to be humble for some selfish reason, that is selfishness trying to appear selfless. Humility is not an affectation. It is not a demure expression of face, or a pretence of being less than you are.

Pagan religions had no place for humility. They prized virtues like dignity, sobriety, self-mastery, piety. But humility seemed to them to be humiliation, and in an honour-based culture, humility seemed like admitting defeat.

But humility is really important, because the Bible places humility at the very root of the entire Christian life. Andrew Murray wrote "Humility is the only soil in which the graces root; the lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure. Humility is not so much a grace or virtue along with others, it is the root of all".

"Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion, I should reply that the first, second, and third thing therein is humility" - Augustine

Why? The Bible tells us that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humility, and the fear of the Lord are the beginning of knowledge, the first principle of fearing God. Here is why: humility is the foundational honesty of a human rightly dealing with God. To continue Andrew Murray's quote, he said "...humility is the root of [all graces and virtues] because it alone assumes the right attitude before God and allows Him as God to do all."

Charles Spurgeon said, "Humility is to make a right estimate of one's self. It is no humility for a man to think less of himself than he ought"

"The meek man is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority. Rather he may be in his moral life as bold as a lion and as strong as Samson; but he has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God's estimate of his own life." A.W. Tozer

Humility is simply the right estimate of who you are in relation to God.

Humility is the oxygen of spiritual life, the atmosphere in which it lives. Without humility, there will be no faith, no virtue, no self-control, no godliness, no brotherly kindness, no love. Without humility, there will be no prayer, no dependence, no submission, and no gratitude. Without humility, there will be no conviction, no confession of sin, no repentance, no growth.

So how do we get this humility?

Phillip Brooks said, "The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is."

In other words, real humility comes through comparison. It is standing next to Jesus and comparing yourself. It is being confronted with the greatness and glory of Christ and then simply getting into your place under Him. This is the commands to be humble are usually in the passive voice: "be humbled", i.e. receive humility by being confronted with God's greatness.

Now that's what we're going to see in the life of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was one of the greats. Jesus later said of him that among men there has been no greater than John the Baptist. But he achieved this greatness not through power, not through self-assertion, but through humility. Not the fake humility of self-flagellation, or self-hatred, or anything like that. In John's life, we will see exactly this secret of humility: a right comparison of yourself with God.

Our focus is going to be John's words from verses 27 to 36. But first, let's set the stage, and understand what we are looking at in the verses that lead up to that.

Verse 22, Jesus and His disciples moved to the land of Judea. Jesus was already in the province of Judea, because that's where Jerusalem is, where He met Nicodemus by night. But he now goes into the Judean countryside and baptises. This is not yet the baptism in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – that will only come after Jesus has risen from the dead and announces the Great Commission. This is basically John's baptism, the baptism of repentance: Jewish people signifying that they need a new start, a spiritual washing.

Verse 23. But at exactly the same time, John the Baptist continues to baptise people in a place called Aenon near Salim, which is just south of Beth Shean in the Jordan valley. This was also close to where Herod lived, and it was soon after this that Herod would arrest John. People are still going out to John.

Verse 24 tells us this was before John was thrown into prison, and that's important because the other Gospels basically begin the ministry of Jesus in Galilee only once John the Baptist is imprisoned. John the apostle knows that and is telling us that Jesus did ministry here in Judea before that ministry began.

Verse 25 John's disciples end up in a dispute with the Jewish leaders about ritual purifying. We can understand why. Judaism had plenty of rituals of washing, some biblical, and some merely traditional. Baptism seemed like some of the washings you would do. A mikveh was a ritual

immersion you would often do: was a big pool of water with steps that you would go into and immerse yourself, and perhaps some of the religious leaders thought that this was what John was doing. Maybe they were already criticising the ministry of Jesus, and brought up the fact that Jesus and His disciples were baptising.

That is what disturbs the disciples of John the Baptist. They come to him, with a tone of alarm and desperation in their voices. “Rabbi- the man who was with you by the Jordan, the one you testified to, He is baptising, and everyone is now going to Him! He's copying our ministry, and stealing our followers. You're losing popularity and followers, and He's gaining. You helped Him, and He's just moving on! You're getting left behind!”

John's responses are at the heart of humility. Here in John's words are three truths to measure yourself against, three comparisons to make which can produce real, biblical humility in your heart, from which all the other virtues grow.

I. God is sovereign, you and I are recipients.

A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.

Whatever a man has, in any season of his life, is from God. It is not that I am losing and Jesus is winning, like this is some competition of who can be more spiritual. No, John says, that is totally the wrong perspective. John looks at his life and says, “A man can receive nothing except what God ordains He have – whether it is my ministry or Jesus's ministry. I don't need to be discontent, restless, or envious. Why? “The steps of a *good* man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way.” (Ps 37:23)

“A man's heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.” (Proverbs 16:9).

This is another way of saying, God is sovereign, man is not.

To say God is sovereign means God has both the might, and the right, the power and the authority to rule over absolutely everything in His cosmos. All that happens, happens by either the direct causation or the indirect permission of God. Nothing in all of reality is random, accidental, or uncaused. He is in control. As one of the old confessions put it “God...upholds directs, disposes, and governs all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence.”

Now why does God's sovereignty humble us? Well, what is it that pride wants? Control. Pride wants to control everything, remove whatever threats it thinks exists, make life predictable, governable. Pride wants to have all of life under its watchful eye, and ultimately receive the credit. We use the term control-freak, and we think of it rather humorously. But being a control-freak is just what the Bible calls pride: I must always be in control of as much of life as possible.

Now if you want humility to come to grow in your soul, begin meditating on how much of your life has been given to you from heaven, and how little of it you control. From your very existence, to your name, to your beating heart, you didn't make it or create it. Your success in life could have been failure with just a slight shift in circumstances, circumstances over which you had no control. Your abilities were given to you before you knew you had them, however you've developed them is also largely something that was given. Think of how much we fight against the idea that God chose us before we were born, because we want to retain the idea that our salvation was in our control. Start considering how much of your abilities, opportunities, health, success, money, marriage, children, family, church was God's gift to you, and you will realise that most of your life is gift.

Most of your attitude should be “thank you”, or at the very least “thy will be done”. Compare yourself to God, if you want humility. Apply 1 Corinthians 4:7 to yourself, “And what do I have that I did not receive? Now if I did indeed receive *it*, why do I boast as if I had not received *it*? (1 Corinthians 4:7) God is the giver, I am the receiver. God is the conductor, I am one of the musicians. God is the author, I am one of the characters.”

That's the first secret of John's humility, and ours. He compares himself to God's sovereignty, and he realises, I only am and have, what God has granted.

II. Christ is central, you and I are reflectors

²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.

John reminds them: you heard me say, I am not the Messiah, I am the forerunner of the Messiah. John then uses an analogy. He compares himself and Jesus to the men at a wedding. That's significant, because in the OT, there was the image of God marrying Israel, and of Messiah being a bridegroom. This is messianic imagery.

In a Hebrew wedding, the friend of the groom was the man who conducted the marriage negotiations on behalf of the groom. He carried messages between the bridegroom and the bride during the time of the betrothal. He had the privilege of standing next to the groom, when the bride and groom were brought together into a private room or under a canopy, and he got to see the expressions on the bride and groom's faces and hear their first words to each other.

John says, I am not the groom, Jesus is. It is His day now, His day of finding His bride. It's not my day, not my wedding, not about me. John does not pretend to be the groom, or to try and steal the day from the groom. To put it another way, Jesus is the centre. Jesus is pre-eminent. Jesus is supreme.

In fact, from verses 31 to 36 we have a theology of how supreme the Son is.

³¹ He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand.

Jesus is above all (v31). He is first, supreme, ultimate. John is a mere man, speaking in human ways.

Jesus is giving first-hand, eyewitness testimony of Heaven (v32). People are rejecting His words, but whoever believes what Jesus says is agreeing that God is truthful (v33), because Jesus is speaking God's Words (v34). In fact, Jesus is anointed with the Spirit without any limitation (v34), and God the Father, is committing all authority and judgement in to the hands of the Son (v35).

John says, how could I be jealous of Him, and try to compete with Him? He is the centre of it all. He is first, and highest, I am not.

Imagine a best man at a wedding seeking to be the centre of attention, trying to get into every photo, interrupting speeches, making his the longest, and just continually diverting attention to himself? What would we think of a man who kept trying to act like the groom, when everyone knew he was the best man? We'd think, “sit down, stop it! It's not your day, it's his!” A best man does his job best when he makes a success of the groom's wedding day, clearing the way, making sure

everything goes according to plan.

And nothing pleases a best man more than to see his friend kiss the bride, and put the ring on the finger, and walk the aisle jubilantly. John says the “the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. “

In other words, my role was to draw attention to Jesus and set Him up for success. And now that has happened, so my joy is complete. I couldn't be happier.

Why will meditating on His supremacy humble me? Because my pride doesn't only want control. My pride wants centrality. I want to be the centre, the focus, the best, the winner, numero uno. Pride is inherently and essentially competitive. Pride is not happy to be beautiful; it must be the prettiest face in the room. Pride is not happy to be intelligent; it must be smarter than everyone else. Pride is not happy with its wealth; it must be richer than others. Pride may not always want all the attention, but it does want the victory, the glory, the vindication, the exaltation over others, the self-satisfaction of being better, greater.

Now to compare yourself to the Son of God is to accept there is one who is infinitely beautiful, infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, infinitely wealthy, infinitely famous. And you are not Him, and never will be. This was the great sin of Satan, that he said in his heart, “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; ¹⁴ I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’ (Isaiah 14:13–14)

But in the book of Revelation, the song sung is always a song about to whom belongs absolute supremacy. “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!” (Revelation 5:12)

Humility is not pretending you are less than you are, or trying to think meanly of yourself. It is simply accepting that Christ is supreme and you are not. Life is not about your glory. Life does not revolve around us. God is Creator, we are creatures. God is the sun, we are the planets. Our role is to be image-bearers, those who reflect His glory, not try to increase our own.

Now if you are happy to be what you are, a reflector of His supremacy, a mirror that reflects Christ to others, then you can enjoy the honour of carrying the image of the most beautiful one in your own person. But if you want the position that belongs to Him, the focus, the centrality, then you are in competition with God. You are seeking a name for yourself, and this will bring you misery and despair.

III. God is supreme; you and I are rejoicers

²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. ³⁰ He must increase, but I *must* decrease

John sums up his life in these words: Jesus must increase; I must decrease. Jesus must grow in fame and honour, I must simultaneously diminish and be forgotten. Jesus must be known and published abroad, I must fade into obscurity. The Person and works of Jesus must become the talk of Israel, the person and works of John the Baptist must be yesterday's news. People must come to decide about Jesus, people must no longer be thinking about John at all. The amount of Jesus' disciples must grow, my disciples should wither away, leave me, and go to Him.

John's life is wrapped up in another Person. And he is not faking it, falsifying unselfishness. He says his joy is maximised, fulfilled when he lives this way. The more Christ increases in glory, and the more John decreases in glory, the more John increases in joy!

John is not sulking. John is not sinking into self-pity. He speaks with a deep pleasure, the deep satisfaction of someone who has followed God's call, and is enjoying the success of serving God. John looks at the exaltation of Jesus, exalt spelled with an 'a' in the middle, Jesus lifted up, increasing in glory, and John exults, spelt with a 'u' in the middle, he rejoices, he praises, he is thrilled. John exults in the exaltation of Jesus.

Why will this humble you? Just like centrality, pride wants to be first. If your life is about increasing your glory, increasing your name, your brand, your power, then you cannot have the joy at the same time. You might get the glory, or some form of it, for a fleeting moment. But if you are happy with God's supremacy, then you get the joy. You must choose if you want the pride of supremacy, or the humility of satisfaction.

This is really good news. God gets the glory; we get the joy. God gets the exaltation, we get the exultation. God gets the supremacy; we get the satisfaction.

Humility is not a smarmy, apologetic weakness. Humility is a right estimate of yourself before God. If you compare yourself to the sovereign, central, and supreme God, you must see yourself as a recipient, as a reflector, and as a rejoicer.

“The man who has struggled to purify himself and has had nothing but repeated failures will experience real relief when he stops tinkering with his soul and looks away to the perfect One. While he looks at Christ, the very things he has so long been trying to do will be getting done within him. It will be God working in him to will and to do.”—Tozer