

Being Humbled

By [William H. Gross](#)

The Dilemma

Is it acceptable to take pride in our service to Christ? I'm confident that our answer should be *yes!*¹ After all, we're called to be careful and visible stewards of our gifts.² We're commanded to be loving, attentive, and diligent servants.³ And yet if we take pride in our service in such a way that we elevate ourselves instead of others, or if we draw glory to ourselves instead of giving it to God, then we become proud. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.⁴ And so we must not boast in what has been given to us.⁵ What then can keep us from becoming proud of our giftedness? ⁶ How can we humble ourselves? If we pursue humility for its own sake, even to overcome our pride, it may turn into false humility. And if our humility is false (or faked), then our pride remains, and we will be opposed by God.

Exercising our gifts with both pride and humility is thus a seeming paradox, a riddle that can perplex and frustrate us. Nonetheless, we are repeatedly admonished to humble ourselves, and so the pursuit of humility is not optional. But how do we properly pursue it? What I hope to prove from Scripture is that biblical humility is not a display of contrition to others, nor is it an image that we try to maintain of ourselves. *Humility is simply our willful obedience and submission to God*, nothing more.⁷ We're now going to look at what humility entails, and how it is expressed.

¹ Pride here means exercising our gifts for the good of the Church and the glory of God. We do so with excellence and diligence, being attentive to the needs and to the care of those around us. ^{NIV} **Rom 15:17** Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.

² ^{NIV} **1Tim 4:14-15** Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.

³ ^{NIV} **Joh 13:35** By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." ^{NKJ} **Pro 18:9** He who is slothful in his work is a brother to him who is a great destroyer. ^{NIV} **Luk 17:3** So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ^{ESV} **Act 20:28** Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [one charged with ensuring the work is done correctly], to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood.

⁴ Pro 3:34; Jas 4:6; 1Pet 5:5; God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

⁵ ^{NIV} **1Cor 4:7** For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

⁶ Proud, in this sense, means an *unwarranted* pride, over-estimating our means or merits, and therefore despising or looking down on others.

⁷ **Exo 10:3** So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said to him, "This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me. **Deu 8:2-3** Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. **1Kng 21:29** "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day." **2Chr 7:14** 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 will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. **2Chr 12:7** When the LORD saw that they humbled themselves, this word of the LORD came to Shemaiah: "Since they have humbled themselves, I will not destroy them but will soon give them deliverance. **2Chr 33:22-23** He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshiped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the LORD; Amon increased his guilt. **2Chr 34:27, 31** Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD... The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD – to follow the LORD and keep his commands, regulations, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book. **Psa 25:9** He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. ^{NIV} **Isa 2:11-12** The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled).

God-defined Humility

In Isaiah 58 we have a description of what God expects when he asks us to humble ourselves. The context is fasting. True fasting, it turns out, is actually a display of biblical humility.

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Isa 58.5-8 ^{NIV}

And so it would appear that fasting is when we willingly obey God's commandment to love one another. When fasting is done perfunctorily for show or for self-exaltation, God condemns it. What he demands of us is sincere contrition and *self*-denial. He exhorts us to visibly demonstrate our contrition by exercising love and mercy toward others, by performing sacrificial acts of kindness and of submission.

As you can see in this passage, true fasting is not to be done as a sham, nor is it a means to “improve” ourselves. It should *cost* us something; and what it costs us should *benefit* someone else. Fasting is not just giving up something so that we can learn self-control for ourselves. That's will-worship as the KJV puts it (Col 2.23). Rather, fasting is inconveniently meeting the needs of another by denying ourselves. That act of setting aside our will and our own desires in order to meet the needs of someone else is also what God means when he asks us to humble ourselves. We set aside our own agenda to fulfill the agenda of God. We sacrifice our own desired outcome in favor of ensuring a better outcome for someone else. We offer up our own will so that the will of God may be done (Mat 6.10; 26.42). And why should we do that? Because, as Isaiah suggests here, in some way every person is related to us as if they were our own flesh and blood (v7). Each is made in the image of God (Gen 1.26), and each is the fleshly offspring of our father Adam (Gen 3.20).

Consider Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. It commends a stranger and an outcast who cares for someone in need when that person's own people, even his own religious leaders, have ignored him. It fulfills the requirements of fasting as described here in this passage. Isaiah is saying that if we submit to God's will, and if we do what is right in his sight, regardless of our own needs, desires, and will, *then* our light will shine; *then* our healing will come; *then* our righteousness will precede us; and *then* the glory of the Lord will be evident. And in that way, our humility will not be a sham. *True humility is doing what is right in God's sight, regardless of our own heart and will in the matter.*

Christ humbled himself

Let's look at what this kind of humility can cost us, and how our doubts and fears affect it. Let's begin with the humility of Christ, our teacher and Lord, to see how he humbled himself before the Father.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:⁸ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be *held onto*, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature

⁸ Literally, “For this be minded in you that is also in Christ Jesus...”

of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, Phi 2.5-9 ^{NIV}

To be Christ-minded in our humility, we do not hold onto our rights. Instead, we make nothing of ourselves, becoming servants by nature. Such servanthood requires complete obedience, even if that obedience might lead to our humiliation and even our death. Only then may we be exalted by God. Jesus gave up everything of his own so that God would be glorified, and that we might benefit by his loss – *by his stripes we are healed* (Isa 53.5). He was rejected by everyone he knew. Justice and mercy would be denied to him when he stood trial. In the end, he would be abandoned by his disciples, even as he laid down his life for them. Everything, *everything*, was secondary to pleasing God and doing his will on our behalf.

At the last supper, Jesus gives us a simple picture of how to humble ourselves in this same way. He chose to do the very menial task of washing his disciples' feet (Joh 13.4-5). Taking off his robes of authority and propriety, he dressed himself in the style of a servant. He was demonstrating to his disciples the full extent of his love (Joh 13.1). It was a love that was evident in everything he did, not just in his willingness to go to the cross to lay down his life for his sheep (Joh 10.11). We are to emulate this example, even if we emulate it imperfectly.

“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. Joh 13.13-17 ^{NIV}

Jesus begins by declaring his titles, thus implying that he has the right to receive respect and servitude from his disciples. And yet he begins to perform a task that clearly ought to be beneath his dignity and stature. He shows us that if it is not beneath *him* to do this menial task, then neither is it beneath *us*. He has come in obedience to his Father’s request. Joh 17.4-5 “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” He came to do the Father’s will for the specific purpose of bringing the Father glory on earth. To accomplish the Father’s will, Jesus *had* to humble himself. And by humbling himself, he too would be glorified.

It is not wrong to expect and even to ask for glory when we have done all that has been asked of us, all that God intended, and all that results in the Father’s glory. *This does not negate our humility*. Rather, it affirms it! ⁹ Jesus had every right *not* to wash his disciples’ feet. But he chose to ignore his rights, his image, his dignity, and whatever personal desires he may have had to be served. Instead, he willfully chose to serve his Father’s will by serving us.

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mat 20.25-28

Christ had his own will, and it was independent of his Father’s will. It was never lost. But it was always set aside in favor of his Father’s will. This is the crucial point to remember. Christ did not

⁹ Lu 17:10 *So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’* This doesn’t mean that we are unworthy of glory; it only means that we are to humble ourselves rather than exalt ourselves so that God might exalt us in due time (1Pet 5:6). And that proves the point.

want to go to the cross. If that were not true, it would not have bothered him so much when Peter demanded that he not go there, that he not die, that he not fulfill his Father's will. That very thought must have crossed Jesus' own mind. Peter was *tempting* Jesus to seek his own life, and his own will, instead of the life of his sheep and the will of his Father. It explains why Jesus treats Peter's rebuke, as a temptation from Satan himself.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Mat 16.22-23 ^{NIV}

It took every ounce of will he had to submit his own desires, and his own will, to those of the Father. Humility, true humility, is an *act* of will, not an *abdication* of will. And there in Gethsemane, we see it being laid down before the Father, pushed beneath the will of the Father, subjugated to the will of the Father, so that the Father might be exalted and glorified by that willful act, that tangible demonstration of his love for the Father and his intentional obedience. Luk 22.42, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not *my* will, but *yours* be done." This is our example of humility that has been celebrated for two millennia. And it is intended that we do likewise, choosing to set aside our own desires, our own will, so that the will of the Father might be done. This intentional act on our part is an *act* of humiliation. And in this sincere act of humility and contrition, we may hope to be exalted. Humility is going to the end of the banquet table, in hopes (if not in expectation) that we will be escorted to a place of honor at the right hand of our host (Luk 14.8-11). And if we are not honored, that's OK. We have only done our duty (Luk 17.10).

Moses was a Humble Man

Perhaps the best example of humility (apart from Christ) may be Moses. Moses was more humble than anyone on the face of the earth (Num 12.3). He was called by God to free his people (Exo 3 and 4). And yet Moses balks at the opportunity. He asks, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" and God said, "I will be with you." Exo 3.11-12. And Moses asks, "But who will I tell them sent me?" and God said, "Tell them I AM sent you." Exo 3.13-14. Moses answered, "What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The LORD did not appear to you?'" (Exo 4.1). So God provided him with a staff and with signs. And then Moses protested that he was *still* inadequate to go down to Egypt: he was not eloquent, being slow of speech and of tongue (Exo 4.10).

The LORD said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." But Moses said, "O Lord, please send someone else to do it." *Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses.* Exo 4.11-14 ^{NIV}

Moses' "meekness" or sense of inadequacy here wasn't humility. It was *fear*. It was lack of trust. It denied God's power, and it rejected his promise of provision. It was Moses' declaration that he actually wanted to do it under his own power and capability, but confessed that he lacked both. And therefore he was hesitating to do what God called him to do. These were *excuses*, not reasons. They were offered up to mask his reluctance to accept God's gifting and his empowering to accomplish the task set before him. And so God's anger burned against him. Our own calling, gifting, and empowerment by the Spirit is not qualitatively different than what Moses received. Therefore, if we are reluctant to employ our gifts to fulfill God's calling for us, we may elicit the same kind of anger from him.

Now, Moses' meekness was not humility; but it wasn't false humility either. I think Moses clearly understood the power of God's hand; and yet he continued to fear. Don't we all do that? We know that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-sufficient. We accept it intellectually. But we somehow doubt that God will act on our behalf; or we doubt that his power and provision will be available to us in the moment of our need. It was not Moses' *fear* that caused God's anger to burn against him, but his *doubt*. He was in effect calling God a liar, attacking His character. Such doubt is what prevents us from being truly humble, because *humility requires trust*.

God would have to teach Moses humility. To learn it, Moses would first have to learn what it means to serve God. Only then would he come to a personal understanding that God alone is the source of his strength. The staff God gave to Moses would provide his "object" lesson. It had no power in itself. In fact, not even Moses' own faith in God could empower it. Faith is not something that we well up within us, or fan into flame in order to activate God's power for our ends. It is not as though the more faith we have, the more power we have. It seems clear that Moses' own capability, authority, and power would not and could not provide for God's people. God alone is *Jehovah Jireh*, "God Our Provider." God alone is the one who empowers us to serve him. Moses was commissioned to speak and to act on God's behalf, not on his own behalf. And when he forgot that principle in the desert at Meribah, his reward was taken from him.

"Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink."

So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "*Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.*" Num 20.8-12

Moses was commanded to speak the words of God to the rock, but instead he spoke his own words to the crowd; and then he struck the rock with his staff, twice. Thus he drew glory to himself and to Aaron. Through this transgression, Moses was humbled under the mighty hand of God. God did not *directly* humble him. Rather, God was instructing him in humility. Moses finally acknowledged God's power and sovereignty as holy things, set apart from anything that might come from Moses himself. In that startling realization, Moses humbled *himself* under God's mighty hand. His humility was both intentional, and intense. He prostrated himself before God in his attitude of mind, just as he had physically done on Mount Sinai for forty days. Perhaps among men, only Peter could understand the depth of such humility, and such humiliation.¹⁰ And yet that is exactly the same humiliation that Christ suffered on the cross, intentional and intense, willful and pained. That's why I will suggest that *only by considering the cross can we truly humble ourselves*.

What then is false humility, or self-focused humility?

¹⁰ Mat 26:74-75 Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their **false humility** and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. Col 2.23 ^{NIV}

In the Greek text, the word “false” isn’t there, even though it’s clearly intended. It simply says, “their humility...” The NAS uses the word “self-abasement” or putting oneself down. Humility means “lowly of mind”, or having a humble opinion of oneself. This is a good and desirable trait. Yet several translations render it “false” humility here. What then turns *true* humility into a *false* humility? The answer is suggested in the phrase “an appearance,” or in the KJV “a show” of humility. It suggests insincerity or acting – putting on a mask. The word translated “appearance” or “show” is *logos*. It means “words,” “doctrine,” or “teaching.” In Joh 1.1 we read, “In the beginning was the Word...” This is the same Greek word *logos*. As it is used there, *logos* means a *pattern* or *form*, the underlying framework and principle of the universe on which everything hangs. So having a form is not bad in itself. For example,

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the **form** [or pattern] of teaching ¹¹ to which you were entrusted. Rom 6.17 ^{NIV}

Yet “form” gives us a feel for what it means to have *false* humility. It is *mere* form without any substance. It is *mere* words without belief. It is *mere* behavior without integrity. It is *mere* actions without sincerity – all of which produce no lasting effect, no permanent good, and no transformation – the mind has not been effectually renewed (Rom 12.2). In time, such baseless and empty forms will produce a harvest of hypocrisy and lies:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – **having a form of godliness ¹² but denying its power**. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, [*the kind*] who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, [*the kind who are*] **always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.**¹³

2 Tim 3.1-7 ^{ESV}

Notice the issue of power again, and of the truth. So humility appears to be a matter of *character*. It is the willingness to acknowledge God as sovereign and as the source of our strength and of all knowledge. He is the One who *does*, and not just the One who observes us doing. Humility is not a matter of how we think about ourselves, or how we comport ourselves in the sight of others, or how we are perceived by others. We may have a reputation of being humble, but that is not the mark of true humility. Some people are naturally quiet and reserved; others appear humble only because they are insecure or meek. We must not confuse Moses’ initial meekness (having a mild disposition) or his timidity ¹⁴ (fearfulness) with humility. How then may we attain true humility without suffering the wrath of God, as Moses did? How can we pursue humility without losing it in the pursuit? Recall the adage that a man who says, “I am humble” cannot possibly be humble.

¹¹ The Greek phrase is *tupos didache*, not *logos*. I’m only showing that having a framework, method, or form of instruction is not a bad thing.

¹² Greek *eusebeia*: piety or devoutness, but not necessarily righteousness (*dikaiosune*). “I go to church every Sunday and sing in the choir...”

¹³ Or “*never being able to fully come to know the truth.*”

¹⁴ ^{NIV} **2Tim 1:7** For God did not give us a spirit of timidity [fearfulness], but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

The answer I'm going to give is fairly simple, but nonetheless true. It seems to me that being humbled requires us, first and foremost, to consider *Christ*; then in light of that consideration, to intentionally humble ourselves under God's mighty hand:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.
Heb 12.2-3 ^{NIV}

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you. 1Pet 5.6 ^{ESV}

As I suggested, humility isn't so much what we think of ourselves, or what we do, or what others may think of us. It is what motivates us. It is not an action done in the presence of others for the benefit of ourselves or our reputation. Rather, true humility seems to be *our willingness to do what needs to be done, according to the will of God, regardless of how we feel about it*. It is refusing to consider anything "beneath" us. What we do, we do in the service of Christ, and that turns it into our great delight and privilege. And just because it has become our great delight and privilege to serve Christ in this way, and to somehow share in his sufferings,¹⁵ that doesn't make it an ego trip on our part. In other words, *we can take pride in serving Christ and glorifying God*, and still humble ourselves by doing it. This may resolve the seeming paradox I mentioned earlier.

Christ "humbled himself and became obedient to death," Phi 2.8. It seems clear that there is a link between humbling himself, and becoming obedient – even to the point of death. This idea is repeated in Rev 2.10. "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." (NIV) We see that being humbled is the struggle to do what is required, and what is right, and to remain faithful to Christ, despite the most primal urge we have, which is to preserve our own life and further our own interests. This choice to humble ourselves is forced upon us by the circumstances of our life, and by the motivation of our spirit to remain true to Christ and to the Gospel. By choosing to remain faithful to what has been entrusted to us – despite whatever provocations and temptations we may have to the contrary – and by spilling out our life as a drink offering in the service of the kingdom,¹⁶ we are humbled.

But again, how exactly do we do that? Is it in fact something that we do (*humble yourselves*), or is it something that is done to us (*be humbled*)? Let's examine the context of 1Pet 5.6 a little closer. It is both a prayer and an exhortation:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, **clothe yourselves with humility** toward one another, because "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

¹⁵ NIV **Rom 8:17** ...we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. *Suffering (i.e. pain) also results from being despised, not appreciated, by those we serve – just as Christ experienced.*

¹⁶ ESV **Phi 2:17** Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1Pet 5.1-11 ^{NIV})

All of the components I've just described are in this passage. What we want to know is how to "clothe ourselves with humility." It's not *passive*; it's *imperative*. It's not circumstantial, but an ongoing duty. The word for "clothe" here actually means to *tie together*. We are to tie ourselves together by means of being humble toward one another. That's how the older ones will not lord it over the younger ones, and how the younger ones will be willing to submit to the older ones. It's how they can evoke and preserve unity in the Body. The humility that makes it possible, becomes evident in their intentions toward one another. They *trust* one another. In other words, humility is not exactly a fruit of the Spirit,¹⁷ but an ingrained character trait that makes the fruit evident. Humility is ingrained in us by God, and practiced by us personally, to produce its own fruit: mutual submissiveness and unity. How is it ingrained in us so that we may practice it?

Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Mat 11.29 ^{NIV} Jesus was humble. It characterized him. He asks us to wear that same yoke of self-restraint. He tells us, "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Mat 18.4 ^{NIV} How does a child humble itself? It doesn't. Children are unabashedly forward and unrestrained. We adults are the ones who must humble ourselves to reflect child-like characteristics. What characterizes a child is unrestrained *trust*. They look up to adults, believing what is told to them without cynicism, counter-opinions, or doubts. They haven't yet learned enough to value their own opinion above God's truth. They don't make themselves co-equal with God in their judgments, as adults often do. Adults have towering egos. We need to suppress such urges to exalt ourselves, and allow God to be God.

Remember that the word for "humble" means to abase, to lower, or to reduce. John the Baptist evidenced this kind of humility when he said to his own disciples, "He must become greater; I must become less." John 3.30 ^{NIV} The ESV puts it, "He must increase, but I must decrease." If we don't humble ourselves, we will be brought low. "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Mat 23.12 ^{NIV} ¹⁸ The great paradox of the Christian life is that the path to glory is through humility.¹⁹ "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." Jas 4.10 Therefore, the Father glorified Christ who humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross (Phi 2.5-9). That's why Christ says,

"Whoever intends to arise in my place: lose sight of himself and his own interests, take up his cross according to the day, and join me on this road [*to Calvary*]." Luk 9.23 (*literal translation*)

Many if not most commentators tell us that we must "die to self" every day. I'm a bit troubled by that interpretation. The reason I'm troubled is that we know that we no longer live, but Christ lives in us (Gal 2.20). We were buried with him, and then resurrected to walk in newness of life

¹⁷ ^{NIV} **Gal 5:22-23** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

¹⁸ ^{NIV} **Isa 2:11-12** The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled)...

¹⁹ From Easton's Dictionary on *humility*.

(Rom 6.4). The old man is already dead (Rom 6.6). We don't have to kill the old self. We're not our own high priest continuing to make a daily sacrifice as if Christ hadn't died once for all (Heb 7.27), as if the task were not finished or our debt had not been paid in full (Joh 19.30). *This* is our freedom! The problem is that we refuse to believe it, and to live our life accordingly. What we are commanded to put to death, are the *deeds of the body* – the *sins of the flesh*:

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Rom 8.13 NKJ)

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. (Col 3.5 NKJ)

And so we are exhorted to humble ourselves, to put off the old self which is dead in its trespasses and sins, and to put on the new self which is freely given to us. It has been paid for in full. It needs no added value from us. Only it is created in us to be righteous and holy. Therefore we humbly recognize that we are completely and eternally indebted to Christ for this new and precious gift. We are completely incapable of meriting it or redeeming it from his hands by anything we can do in this life. We cannot clear our debt to him in any way. And thus we owe a debt of love to him and to all others (Rom 13.8). We live to Christ with him in mind (Rom 14.8), for we are called to live as his holy ones, as *saints* (Rom 1.7), as a *righteous people* – because that's who and what we are. And we are humbled by it.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4.22-24 ^{NIV}

There is no middle ground, as if we could put off the old self without putting on the new one, or put on the new self without putting off the old. Our unwillingness to put off the old self is caused by our unwillingness to become lowly of mind, and our refusal to humble ourselves in consideration of Christ on the cross. The old self lives in pride and self-interest. The new self lives in humility and love. If we continue in our old ways, our “former way of life”, then we *cannot* be truly humble, and we *cannot* sincerely love. We refuse to take up our cross. We refuse to become less that Christ might become more. We refuse to serve in any way that is pleasing to God, or to put the interests of Christ or others ahead of our own.²⁰ And so we practice false humility and insincere love in our service to the Church, to Christ, and to the world.²¹ We put on a false mask of humility, trying to hide our infidelity to Christ, who is our true Lord and Master.

Now let's return once more to 1Pet 5.6. “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand.” In the original Greek, “humble yourselves” is imperative, just as we read it here in English. It is *passive* tense, meaning it is something that is done to us.²² It might be translated, “Be humbled, therefore, under God's mighty hand.” It suggests that God will humble us whether we want to be humbled or not. That's not quite right. The key, I think, may be found in the second phrase “under God's mighty hand.” This is a figure of speech. In our mind's eye, we might see a mighty hand smashing a bothersome fly, or swatting a wayward child. It seems more

²⁰ Phi 2:4, 21

²¹ ^{NIV} **Phi 1:15-17** It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely. ^{NIV} **Rom 12:9** Love must be sincere. ^{NIV} **2Cor 11:3** But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ^{NIV} **1Pet 1:22** Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.

²² Jas 4:10 reads the same, “be humbled.”

like a threat than an encouragement. And so we assume our choice is either to humble ourselves willingly, or be humbled by God against our will. It's like an earthly father yelling, "Don't you make me come down there..." That's not a proper view of our heavenly Father at all.

"Mighty hand," as I said, is figurative. It means *the power of God*. The original language indicates that such power is an *agency*, a means of accomplishing something. Therefore the Greek preposition *hupo*, often translated "under", could be translated here as "by." That would reflect the agency involved. So we might render this verse, "Be humbled by the power of God." Now, I'm no Greek scholar. I'm only suggesting a possible way to look at this verse that helps us understand how to humble ourselves. It is our duty and responsibility to "be humbled", but we recognize that the only means by which we can do that is "by the power of God." That is consistent with the clear principle of Scripture that God is completely sovereign, and we are completely responsible. Thus the translation "humble yourselves" is exactly right in the context of God's power. And it is affirmed in Mat 18.4 which was quoted above: "whoever humbles himself like this child..." That is *not* passive tense. It is a *command* of Christ. It is something we are called upon to do. We are to lower ourselves against our own desire to be exalted. And in doing so, we will be exalted.²³

Just one last point and we'll be done. The power of God that enables us to humble ourselves is something that we must employ to humble ourselves. It does not come automatically simply because we choose to be "lowly of mind." It must be appropriated. The Spirit lives in us to glorify Christ²⁴ and to sanctify his people by the Word of God.²⁵ The Bible is the primary means by which our minds are renewed, and our lives are sanctified. It is the primary source of our knowledge about Christ and God's Plan of Salvation. Now, we can read the Bible and study it, and gather knowledge, but that will not sanctify or transform us of itself. In fact, it may lead to knowledge that puffs up, not love that builds up.²⁶ It may produce only a form of godliness, where we are ever-learning but never fully coming to know the truth.²⁷ What then transitions us from knowledge to love, from participation to transformation? It is this, and nothing more:

In everything we do, we are to consider Christ who was sent by the Father to redeem us for his own glory.²⁸

²³ NIV **Mat 23:5-11** "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.' "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. ^{NIV} **Luk 14:8-11** "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

²⁴ NIV **Joh 16:13-14** But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.

²⁵ NIV **Joh 14:26** But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ^{NIV} **Joh 17:17** Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

²⁶ 1Cor 8:1.

²⁷ 2Tim 3:5,7.

²⁸ ESV **2Pet 1:3-4** His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ^{NIV} **Rom 9:23** What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he

It is our consideration of Christ that ultimately renews our mind and transforms us. It is what drives us to God's Word to learn more, and to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to practice the truth of God, and exercise the love of God, for Christ's sake and for God's glory. Otherwise we are like a house built on sand instead of on rock.²⁹ We are not to elevate ourselves so as to compete with God, trying to steal the glory which belongs to him alone. And so we choose to lower or decrease ourselves even as we strive to do what is right in the sight of God and men, so that God might be exalted.³⁰

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 1Cor 10.31

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Col 3.17

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Col 3.23-24 ^{NIV}

And in this last verse, we come full circle. It's OK to humbly serve Christ, knowing that we will receive a reward. It is reserved for us in heaven. Meanwhile, we strive here on earth to be faithful stewards of our giftedness, and of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, all to the glory of God.

Of course, we might hope that knowing the depth of our own depravity,³¹ and the necessity of Christ's sacrifice,³² we would find it easy to be humbled. But the fact is, our depravity — our pride and ego, our self-interest and self-devotion — causes us to rebel against the rule of God. We reject in whole or in part the provision of God in Christ; thus we don't consider Christ first and foremost in all we do. We continually grieve and quench the Spirit who is our Helper; thus we must strive on our own to humble ourselves — which is an effort doomed to failure. We steal glory for ourselves, instead of giving glory to God, to whom all glory is due.

Thus we come to realize, reluctantly and ashamedly, that to be humbled by the power of God in order to receive glory, is not only the great paradox of the Christian life, but its greatest struggle. To serve God with pride and diligence, and to do so with complete and sincere humility, is the goal towards which we all strive in this race. We have to accept the fact that we will all stumble from time to time in the race as we take our eyes off the cross. We run for the prize and for the glory of God. But we constantly remind ourselves that the strength by which we run is born of humility. And that humility grows from the knowledge that it is not our own strength, but the power of God that enables us; it is the love of God in Jesus Christ that drives us onward. For in the end, we realize that all eyes have not been on us who are running the race. Rather, all eyes have been, and will eternally *remain* on Christ, the Prize.

prepared in advance for glory. ^{NIV} **Eph 1:11-12** In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

²⁹ ^{ESV} **Mat 7:26-27** And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

³⁰ ^{NIV} **Mat 5:16** In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. **1Pet 2:12** Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

³¹ Rom 3:10-18.

³² ^{NIV} **Joh 14:6** Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.