

Humility: The Root of Virtue

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *What does it mean to be humble?*
- *Is it always good to be humble?*
- *Why is humility the root of virtue?*

Humility: The Center of Good

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines “humility” as, “having or showing a low estimate of one’s importance” (p. 397). But in the post-modern western world, it is not always virtuous to have a low estimate of one’s own personal importance. Today’s world seems to prefer pride, having or displaying excessive self-esteem and having proper self-respect (*Webster’s Ninth New College Dictionary*, p. 947).

Our post-modern societies find a place for both pride and humility. In the Bible, however, they are at opposite ends of the moral spectrum. Biblically, pride is always bad and humility is always good (Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 3:34; Matthew 23:12; and 1 Peter 5:5-6). More than that, there is a sense in which pride is the center of all evil; and humility is the center of all virtue (Isaiah 66:2; Micah 6:8).

The pride/humility issue is not simply one of high or low self-esteem. Both Christian and pagan, theist and atheist, absolutist and relativist, would hold to the worth of the individual. The question is, how did the individual obtain worth? What makes us valuable?

Pride says we have value in ourselves.

Humility says we have value because we are created in the image of God.

Pride says we should pursue self-actualization.

Humility says we should be conformed to the image of Christ.

Pride says we should determine our own independent spiritual values.

Humility says we should seek and keep God’s spiritual values.

Pride says glory resides in man.

Humility says glory resides in God.

The question is, Where does virtue come from? What is its ultimate source?

Pride says, “Man.”

Humility says, “God.”

Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created (Revelation 4:11).

Six Principles of Humility

1. Humility is not competitive

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4).

Humility does not get pleasure from having things or not having things (Philippians 4:12). The reason is, humility does not compete for things. It also does not compete for positions of authority or avoid such positions. It was part of the humility of Moses to accept the highest position in Israel (Numbers 12:3). The same could be said of Joseph, Daniel, and David.

Humility is not ashamed of being poor. Nor does it avoid being rich. A humble person would not feel guilty for financial failure if he worked hard as unto the Lord. He would also not feel guilty for being rich. Instead, he would see God as the source of his money (Job 1:1-3; Genesis 13:2, 6; 1 Timothy 4:4).

Humility is recognizing everything good comes from God--that includes our bodies, talents, intelligence, race, nationality, and personality. A humble person would never think, "I have wealth or an education or a good position because I worked hard to get it."

Humility doesn't compete with itself. A humble person not only doesn't compete with others, he also doesn't compete with himself (Philippians 3:13-14). To compete with our self (say, a previous record or achievement) is to focus on my own previous achievement in the past rather than on God. The result of self focus for self competition is to bring glory to self - even if only in your own eyes. That's pride not humility. Humility does all things in, say, sports or school or business, for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

2. Humility pursues excellence

That means doing the best he can, accomplishing what he can, and becoming what he can--developing his gifts, abilities, talents, as well as his position, job, or assignment (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). But his focus is on glorifying God and being approved by God (2 Corinthians 10:17-18).

That means the humble person's success includes more than just success at his job, education, or other pursuits. Success also includes preserving his marriage, parenting his children, being honest with his customers, not cheating, or lying, etc. (Galatians 5:21-23). Humility defines success from God's perspective.

3. Humility seeks power--from God

Both humility and pride seek power (the possession or control of might). The difference is this. Pride sees the source of power as residing in people. This could be individually as a person or collectively as a team. Being proud of my team is just as sinful as being proud of myself. Pride seeks to be a source of that power--a reservoir, not just a channel. *For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, The fountain of living waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns, That can hold no water* (Jeremiah 2:13; see also Matthew 26:64; Ephesians 3:7; Acts 1:8; Romans 1:16, 20; and 2 Timothy 1:7).

Humble people see God as the source and themselves as a channel of power.

Prideful powerful people see their accomplishment as a product of their own value (Daniel 4:30, John 19:10). Humble powerful people see their power as God's power, distributed (channeled) through them (Daniel 4:37; John 10:11; Numbers 12:3). Humble people seek power only in the sense of being an instrument of God.

4. Humility serves God

Humility serves people, too, of course, but in a context of their value before God as a creation of God--not as an independent disconnected source of value. Pride serves people as an end in itself. Communism, for example, advertises itself as the power of the people, as in, "The Peoples' Republic of China." This, of course, devalues people as something less than the image of God because it is a system of pride, not humility.

5. Humility is sensitive to sin.

Humble people focus on their sin.

Prideful people focus on their accomplishment (Luke 18:9-14)

In Luke 18, Jesus told one of the most radical stories ever told. The story reveals that pride attempts to serve God through accomplishments. "Thank God I'm not like those sinners." A humble person focuses on his own sin, which disqualifies him from service. It is out of humility that God uses us (see 2 Chronicles 33:1-16).

6. Humility has unlimited resources

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

Pride competes for limited resources. It focuses on mine and competes for yours. It can get only what people have and do only what people can do.

Humility realizes resources are rooted in God and distributed by God (Philippians 2:5-11). Since all good gifts, abilities, wealth, and power, are from God, the resources of the humble person are unlimited (James 1:17).

Pride uses my resources to compete for (or with) the resources God has placed in others. What should make the church different from the world is its unity, derived from its humility. Humility develops unity by tapping into the resources God has placed in His people (Ephesians 1:1-16 and Luke 22:26-27).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What does it mean to be humble?*

A: Humility sees all value, virtue, power, and glory beginning and ending in God.

Q: *Is it always good to be humble?*

A: Yes. Humility sees people as distributors (channels rather than sources or reservoirs) of the glory of God. The best good there could ever be is to display the glory of God.

Q: *Why is humility the root of virtue?*

A: All virtue begins with the conviction that God alone is the source of all good. Actions based on that commitment are based in humility.