

“Your Greatest Need: Humility”**

The following conversation occurred in London in the late 1800’s. A lady said to Pastor Charles Spurgeon, “Oh Sir, I pray for you every day that you may be kept humble!” Spurgeon observed that she was a fine looking woman and splendidly dressed. He replied, “Thank you very much; but you remind me of a failure in my duty. I have never prayed for you that you might be kept humble.” She responded, “Dear Sir, there is no need for such prayers, for I am not tempted to be proud.” Spurgeon later observed wryly, “How proud she was to have obtained such a delusion.”^[2]

Last week we began a series on Pride and Humility. In our first message we reflected on three guarantees revealed about pride in James 4:6.

Guarantee #1: If I am proud, God is against me.

James 4:6 says He *opposes* the proud. In point of fact, God *hates* pride.

Proverbs 6:16-17 “There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood...”

Charles Bridges in his commentary on Proverbs says,

“Pride lifts up the heart against God and **contends for the supremacy with Him**. How unseemly moreover is this sin? A creature so utterly dependent and so fearfully guilty, yet proud in heart.” Charles Bridges

Guarantee #2: If I am proud, I will not receive grace.

God is gracious, that is, He loves to give to needy people, but James 4:6 makes it clear that He gives grace *to the humble*, and only to the humble. The proud do not receive grace. That means that in the problems of life the proud are on their own.

Consequently...

Guarantee #3: If I am proud, I need to humble myself.

Since God opposes the proud, *we need humility*. But that raises some important questions. What is humility? How do you obtain it? How do you keep it? Let’s look to God’s Word for answers.

If we are going to develop humility the Scriptures make it clear that we must understand and get serious about three issues.

I. Get serious about the root of humility. James 4:6; Micah 6:8

Humility is fundamental to a God-pleasing life, a fact the prophet Micah emphasized over seven centuries before Christ.

Micah 6:8 He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and **to walk humbly with your God.**

The concept of humility in the Old Testament is communicated by words that in essence mean, “*to bow low,*” “*to crouch down.*” That’s what God wants His people to do in their hearts, to see themselves as servants, His servants.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for humble (*tapeinos*) basically means “*to be low*” (TDNT). We find this definition in the Greek-English lexicon: “of low position, poor, lowly, undistinguished, of no account.”

It’s worth noting that for the ancient Greeks humility was NOT a commendable quality. It was a negative term. But God’s Word elevates it and holds it up as something desirable and needed.

Let’s address four root issues concerning humility.

A. Humility is not natural.

To the contrary, pride is natural. Thinking of yourself first is natural. Getting offended when someone slights you is natural. But taking a low position, a servant’s position, is not natural. In fact, in Romans 7 Paul described his internal battle by saying he did NOT do the good he knew he should do but often did the self-centered evil he knew he should NOT do, and concluded...

Romans 7:24 “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Please know that if you do what comes naturally it will NOT be to exhibit humility. When I do what comes naturally, I do not help my wife with the dishes. I do not put down the newspaper and talk with my teenage daughter. I do not spend time in fervent prayer for my church family. I do those things only when I do the *unnatural* things and humble myself.

B. Humility is not optional.

Listen to what God says about humility...

Isaiah 66:1-2 “This is what the LORD says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these

things, and so they came into being?’ declares the LORD. ‘This is the one I esteem: **he who is humble** and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.’”

Who does God esteem? Not the million dollar athlete, not the powerful business executive, not the teen who drives the most expensive car to school. It’s not the one who is great in the world’s eyes. It’s the person who is *humble*. Pastor Brad Bigne elaborates:

“What captures His attention? Humility. Humility is what captures God’s attention. Nothing escapes God’s notice. Not a thing. But one thing captures His attention. He’s aware of all things – He’s omniscient, and yet He’s revealed here in this passage as searching for one thing. ‘To this one I will look – he who is humble and contrite.’” Brad Bigne

Let me be more specific. Humility is a requirement for three things...

1. It is a prerequisite to salvation.

That’s what the psalmist acknowledged in Psalm 18:27...

Psalm 18:27 You **save the humble** but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.

God is a saving God. He delights in saving lost people. But which lost people does He save? The humble, only the humble. Jesus made that point perfectly clear by using a visual aid in one of His sermons...

Matthew 18:2-4 He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever **humbles himself like this child** is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”

To enter God’s kingdom there is no payment required, no credentials to meet, save one. You must acknowledge you don’t deserve to be there. You must see yourself as being powerless, weak, and helpless. Jesus came to save sinners—it’s why He went to the cross and gave His life, to reconcile the alienated back to God, to rescue the perishing, to save the lost. But to be saved you must admit that fact—and this is something a proud person will not do—you must admit that you are helplessly *lost*. Like this man did...

Luke 18:13-14 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For **everyone who exalts himself will be**

humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So salvation is a prerequisite to salvation. That’s not all...

2. *It is a prerequisite to fruitful Christian living.*

Show me a proud Christian and I’ll show you a frustrated Christian, one who puts his head on the pillow at night knowing the tragic truth that God is very distant. The opposite is true, however, for the humble...

Psalm 25:9 He **guides the humble** in what is right and teaches them his way.

God is personally involved in the life of the humble person. He’s not only near them but He *guides* them. “The Lord is my shepherd,” David said. Proud people don’t need a shepherd—they’d rather fend for themselves. But the humble know the joy of the Shepherd’s guiding hand.

Again, what we’re talking about is a foreign concept to the world, but it’s vital. Jesus said that the *way up* is the *way down*.

Matthew 23:11-12 “The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and **whoever humbles himself** will be exalted.”

3. *It is essential for unity in families, churches, workplaces, and teams.*

“What’s the big idea?” said the husband to his wife. “You used *my* razor!” Thirty minutes later the argument ended with a slammed door.

Did you have any controversy in your home this week? What caused it? Somewhere there was a dose of pride. To reiterate, pride destroys families, churches, workplaces, and teams.

But here’s the good news. Humility brings blessing to families, churches, workplaces, and teams.

Ephesians 4:2-3 “**Be completely humble** and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Note the connection between *humility* and *unity*. There can be no true unity without humility. “How do humble people treat each other?” you ask. Paul addresses that question in the following chapter of Ephesians...

Ephesians 5:21 “**Submit to one another** out of reverence for Christ.”

To *submit* means, “to place in rank under.” When people submit to each other they put their personal interests **under** the interests of the others.

Again, this is not natural. Pride is natural, and that’s one of the main reasons so many families, churches, workplaces, and teams are fragmented. Beloved, pride is destructive, as Lou Priolo points out in his book, *The Complete Husband*:

“The sin of pride carries with it God's swiftest and most severe judgment. It blinds you to other sins in your life and hinders you from repenting of them. Pride is the "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome" or the (AIDS) of the soul. When a person dies as a result of acquiring AIDS, he doesn't really die of AIDS rather, he dies of an AIDS-complicated illness like pneumonia, tuberculosis, or meningitis. Not unlike a cataract, the AIDS virus somehow blinds the eyes of its victim's bodily defense system. This prevents his auto immune system from seeing and consequently destroying those deadly viruses and bacteria that ultimately kill him. Like AIDS, pride blinds you not only to itself, but to every other sin tucked away in the recesses of your heart and life. It causes you to hate correction and reproof. It hides your sin from you, it justifies your sin, it excuses your sin, and it keeps you from repenting of your sin. It deceives you into thinking that you're spiritually well when, in fact, you have deadly cancer and are in desperate need.”[\[3\]](#) --Lou Priolo

“So if pride is bad and humility is good, are we supposed to live in never-ending soul search?” you ask. Some people do just that—and quite frankly their “humility” is not very pleasant to be around! In point of fact, they have misunderstood humility, for...

C. Humility is not mere introspection.

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones explains:

“I suggest that we cross the line from self-examination to introspection when, in a sense, we do nothing but examine ourselves, and when such **self-examination becomes the main and chief end in our life**. We are meant to examine ourselves periodically, but if we are always doing it, always, as it were, putting our soul on a plate and dissecting it, that is introspection. And if we are always talking to people about ourselves and our problems and troubles, and if we are forever going to them with that kind of frown upon our face and saying: I am in great difficulty – it probably means that we are all the time centered upon ourselves. That is introspection, and that in turn leads to the condition known as **morbidity**.” --Martin Lloyd-Jones [\[4\]](#)

What then *is* humility? It's this...

D. Humility is choosing to focus on God and others, not yourself.

Should we search our souls? Yes, the Bible commands us to examine ourselves (2 Cor. 13:5). But not endlessly! The purpose of self-examination is so we can get our eyes off of ourselves and focus on loving God and others.

One of the times we tend to become very self-focused is when we go through trials. When we're hurting we want everyone to know! Peter offers this counsel...

1 Peter 5:6-7 **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.

Last week we investigated James 4:6 and learned that pride must go. But how, in practical terms, do we get rid of pride? James tells us in the next four verses by laying before us ten very pointed commands.

To get rid of pride I must do the following (James 4:7-10)...

1. *Submit to God and resist the devil.*

The Puritan pastor Charles Bridges said that pride is "contending for supremacy with God." Here's the opposite of that. *Submit to God*. If you want to mortify pride you must let God be God in your life and then resist the devil who is the prime contender for the supremacy of God. It's worth noting that the last words of another Puritan, Richard Baxter, modeled this:

"Lord, what thou wilt, where thou wilt, and when thou wilt."[\[5\]](#) --last words of Richard Baxter

2. *Come near to God.*

Proud people don't need God. But when I take steps to come near to God I am saying, "I need You!" Coming near to God begins when we approach the cross and receive God's Son as our Savior. But coming near to God is a choice we must make on a daily basis. We'll talk about that more later.

3. *Wash my hands and purify my heart.*

In other words, if you want to mortify pride you must get serious about getting rid of every manifestation of sin in your life, both in deed (your hands) and thought (your heart). You need to be cleaned up and that by the power of Christ!

George Whitefield, the eighteenth century evangelist observed:

“Every man by his own natural will hates God. But when he is turned to the Lord by evangelical repentance, then his will is changed; then his conscience, now hardened and benumbed, shall be quickened and weakened; then his hard heart shall be melted, and his unruly affections shall be crucified. Thus, by that repentance, the whole soul will be changed, he will now have new inclinations, new desires, and new habits.”[\[6\]](#) -- George Whitefield

4. *Grieve, mourn, and wail.*

To *grieve* comes from *talaiporeo* which means “to be miserable.” It’s the response of a person who feels the weight of his sin and the judgment he deserves. To *mourn* is what a person does when he’s lost a loved one. To *wail* is the intense activity of a mourner. But God’s Word says those are the activities of a person seeking to mortify pride.

Someone told an old preacher that in one of his services a certain woman had gotten “joy in the Lord” (i.e. conversion). He wisely responded with this penetrating question, “Did she ever get any sorrow?” He knew that to experience real joy you must first experience real sorrow, sorrow for one’s sin.[\[7\]](#)

Charles Spurgeon wrote, “There is a vital connection between soul-distress and sound doctrine. Sovereign grace is dear to those who have **groaned deeply** because they see what **grievous sinners** they are.”[\[8\]](#)

But groaning deeply over our sin (and especially our pride) is NOT natural. Francis Fuller explains why:

“To repent is to accuse and condemn ourselves; to charge upon ourselves the desert of hell; to take part with God against ourselves, and to justify him in all that he does against us; to be ashamed of and confounded for our sins...**For we naturally love and think well of ourselves,** hide our deformities, lessen and excuse our faults, indulge ourselves in the things that please us, are mad upon our lusts, and follow them, though to our own destruction.”[\[9\]](#) -- Francis Fuller

And that’s why a proud person must grieve, mourn, and wail. By the grace of God he has been gripped by the seriousness of his sin and wants to turn from it.

Is it easy to repent? It is not. Your pride will fight against repentance every step of the way. How can we overcome it? By doing this...

5. *Humble myself before the Lord.*

Consider God’s promise in verse 10...

James 4:10 **Humble yourselves** before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

If I humble myself (make myself low), God will lift me up. Augustine put it this way:

“God gives what He demands.” Augustine

Namely, He gives grace, sufficient grace, but only to the humble.

It starts with getting serious about the *root* of humility. But there’s a second step we must take if we’re going to experience God-pleasing humility.

II. Get serious about the fruit of humility.

What does humility look like? The Bible addresses this question from two perspectives.

A. Christ was humble.

Listen to what Christ said about Himself:

Matthew 11:29 “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.”

If anyone had a right to NOT be humble, it was the Lord Jesus. Before He came to earth, He received the worship of angels. But He left that, in obedience to His Father, and came to earth. His incarnation is the greatest display of humility this world has ever seen, exceeded only by what He did at the cross...

Philippians 2:8 “And being found in appearance as a man, **he humbled himself** and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!”

What the Savior asks us to do is nothing more than what He Himself did. He who is God Himself *humbled Himself*. Therefore...

B. To receive Christ is to receive a call to humility.

When the crowds showed interest in Jesus, here’s what He told them:

Luke 9:23-24 “If anyone would come after me, he must **deny himself** and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever **loses his life for me** will save it.”

Let there be no misunderstanding. If you’ve received Christ you have received a call to humility. Let’s talk in specific terms about what this looks like in day to day life. Let’s identify the *fruit of humility*.

I’m indebted again to Stuart Scott’s booklet, *From Pride to Humility*. In it he lists twenty-four manifestations of humility. I’ve adapted it to twelve.

When I humble myself...

1. I focus on Christ. Phil. 1:21

“For me to live is Christ,” Paul said. The humble love Christ. They see Him as their greatest prize and joy. There is no other person or thing that they *must* have, except for *Him*.

2. I trust in God rather than question Him. Rom. 9:19-23

A humble person keeps in mind that God is Creator, while he is a creature. “He does see himself as even remotely qualified to pass judgment on God or what God does,” writes Dr. Scott. “He knows that his perfect and all-wise God can do whatever He pleases, and it will be the best for him.”

Romans 9:19-23 “... **Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?** “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?”

3. I pray a lot because I am so needy.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 commands, “Pray continually.”

I’m ashamed to say how many times I have faced a challenge and my first response was NOT to pray. That indicates pride. Humble people pray a lot because they realize they are so helpless. John Owen once said:

“We can have no power from Christ unless we live in a persuasion that we have none of our own.” --John Owen

4. *I think about grace a lot.*

A humble person realizes he deserves hell. He really does. He knows that the only reason he is heading for heaven is because of God's unmerited favor, *the only reason*. So he thinks about grace a lot. And he thanks God for it. Specifically, though he works hard, when he accomplishes something he gives the credit to God. Like Paul did...

1 Corinthians 15:10 "But by the **grace of God** I am what I am, and **his grace** to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but **the grace of God** that was with me."

"If there's anything good in my life, it's because of *grace*," so thinks and says the humble person. Does that describe you?

5. *I thank God and others a lot.*

Dr. Scott observes that humble people "expect nothing, so anything that is received is greatly appreciated." And when they receive it they express appreciation to the giver, whether the giver is God or another person.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

6. *I see myself as no better than others.*

A humble person knows the truth about himself that others can't see. His heart is sinful. For that reason and others, he doesn't look down on people, no matter who the other person is. He echoes Paul who said:

1 Timothy 1:15-16 "...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life."

7. *I have an accurate view of my gifts and abilities.*

Some people boast about their accomplishments. Other people grumble because they can't do the things others can. Both responses are evidence of hearts that are filled with pride.

Romans 12:3 "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

A humble person sees himself accurately. He doesn't take credit for what he is, and he doesn't try to be what he isn't.

8. I am a good listener.

Are you a poor listener? It may be more than a hearing problem. It's likely a *heart* problem. Humble people operate with the understanding that other people have important things to say, too. So they ask them good questions, and then *listen*. They take to heed James 1:19...

James 1:19 "...Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

9. I am grateful for criticism or reproof.

Humble people admit they don't know everything, and because they know they are sinners, they aren't surprised when criticism comes.

Proverbs 9:8 "...Rebuke a wise man and he will love you."

The humble view reproof as good and welcome it. They understand that God often works through people to correct us.

10. I serve others.

Proud people loved to be served. Not so the humble. They are constantly looking for ways to help others, not for human applause or recognition either. They are the first to volunteer for the jobs no one else wants (Gal. 5:13). And they don't wait to be asked either. They see a need and they take action to meet it.

11. I am quick to admit when I am wrong.

Humble people say words that never come from the lips of the proud-hearted, "You are right. I was wrong. Thank you for telling me." (Prov 29:23)

12. I am quick to ask for and grant forgiveness.

Humble people are quick to ask others for forgiveness because they freely admit they are sinners and long to be peacemakers. Furthermore, humble people are quick to grant forgiveness because they know how much God has forgiven them.

Colossians 3:12-14 “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, **humility**, gentleness and patience. **Bear with each other and forgive** whatever grievances you may have against one another. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you...**”

Have you ever given your spouse the “silent treatment?” You know, it’s what happens after your partner hurts your feelings in some way, and instead of dealing with the issue God’s way, you close your heart and mouth. The silent treatment can go on for days, in some cases weeks, or longer. “I’ll show them,” you think. But what you really show them (and the all-seeing God) is that you have a proud heart, and what you desperately need to do is to *humble yourself*.

So there’s what it looks like, the *fruit* of humility. Do you see that fruit in your life? If so, give God the glory. If not, or if the fruit is scant, you’re probably asking the question, *how?* In practical terms *how do I humble myself?* Here’s the short answer...

III. Get serious about the pursuit of humility.

“The *pursuit* of humility?” you say. “You mean like it’s a journey or something?” That’s right. It’s a journey. It’s something we are *pursuing*.

“How do we attain it?” It starts by doing what you are doing right now, opening your heart up to God’s Word.

Quite honestly, I’ve heard more feedback in response to last Sunday’s message on pride than just about any message I’ve ever preached. People have freely confessed, “Yes, I struggle with pride. I agree with what you’ve shared.” Many people came back last Sunday night for small group interaction. And you’ve come back this morning to learn about humility. That’s good, but I must warn you, borrowing an observation by C. J. Mahaney:

“Here’s a scary thought. It’s possible to **admire humility** while **remaining proud** ourselves.” C. J. Mahaney [\[10\]](#)

So listening to a message on humility, though good, is insufficient. We need a course of action, and I intend to offer one. I want to map out some practical steps that will lead you to the destination of humility. I’ll share three steps this week and more next time, once again borrowing several insight from C. J. Mahaney...

A. Study the attributes of God.

Especially study God’s *incommunicable* attributes. Read a book like *Knowing God*, by J. I. Packer.

Psalm 50:21 “...you thought I was altogether like you...”

That's one of our problems. We think God is like us. But the more aware we become of the infinite difference and the infinite distance between God and us, the more humility we'll exhibit. That's what Job learned:

Job 38:1-7 "Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: 'Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?..."

So do a study of God's attributes. Here are a few for starters...

1 Timothy 1:17 "Now to the King **eternal, immortal, invisible**, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

B. Meditate on the cross every day.

The brilliant theologian Carl Henry said it well:

"How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?" Carl Henry[\[11\]](#)

We need to begin every day thinking about the cross, singing about the cross, thanking God for the cross, and preparing ourselves to spread the message of the cross. You cannot be proud when your mind is fixed upon the scene of your Savior hanging on the cross.

Galatians 6:14 "**May I never boast except in the cross** of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

Read John Piper's *The Passion of the Christ*. Get a clearer view of the cross.

Hebrews 12:2-3 "**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus**...who for the joy set before him **endured the cross**, scorning its shame... **Consider him** who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

For now, one more suggestion. If you want to pursue humility...

C. Learn to laugh at yourself (others do!).

If you can't, normally the root issue is p

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[2] Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 30, p. 141.

[3] *The Complete Husband*, Lou Priolo, p. 21-22

[4] Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, p. 17.

[5] Richard Baxter, quoted in *James*, by Kent Hughes, p. 185.

[6] George Whitefield, quoted in *James*, by John MacArthur, p. 210.

[7] As told by Kent Hughes, *James*, p. 189.

[8] Charles Spurgeon, quoted in *James*, by John MacArthur, p. 211.

[9] Francis Fuller, quoted in *James*, by John MacArthur, p. 212.

[10] C. J. Mahaney, *Humility*, p. 63.

[11] Mahaney, p. 68.