

HUMILITY DEFINED

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The Greek word for humility is literally “lowliness of mind,” or “humble-mindedness.”¹ Humility is “the grace of ‘lowliness.’”² It is the virtue of modesty. It is the opposite of conceit, arrogance, high-mindedness, or selfish ambition. Humility is a lowly or modest attitude of mind towards self, God, and people and a corresponding life-style that accords with that attitude of mind. Jesus Christ was lowly in heart (Matt. 11:29).

HUMILITY BEFORE GOD

In our relationship to God, humility is the only right-thinking and logical response of a creature before the Creator. We are sinful creatures and he is a holy Creator God. We are small and he is “infinite and absolute and illimitable.”³ We know little and he knows all things. The cries of the humble minded are recorded in Scripture. These are not sanctimonious platitudes, nor weak-minded confessions, nor statements of false modesty, but realistic self-appraisals before the Creator of all things. Let us, with these saints of old, confess our creatureliness, smallness, unworthiness, and complete dependence before an infinitely holy God:

Abraham, the patriarch: “I who am but dust and ashes.” (Gen. 18:27)

Jacob, the patriarch: “I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.” (Gen. 32:10)

King David: “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?” (2 Sam. 7:18)

Isaiah, the prophet, in a vision of the Lord: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips...for my eyes have seen...the Lord.” (Isa. 6:5)

Peter, an apostle: “Depart from me I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Luke 5:8)

A repentant tax collector: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13)

Prodigal Son: “I have sinned.... I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” (Luke 15:18-19)

John the Baptist: “He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.” (Matt. 3:11)

Paul, an apostle, but also a once proud religious leader: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” (1 Tim. 1:15)

¹ “Humility” (*tapeinophrosynē*) is a compound word made up of the two words “lowly” (*tapeinos*) and “mind” (*phrosynē*).

² Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 200.

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Life of Joy: An Exposition of Philippians 1 and 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 194.

A humble heart submits to God and trusts in him with complete dependence. The first of the beatitudes is, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). No one will enter God’s heaven who will not confess being “poor in spirit” and desperately needing God’s grace and help for salvation.⁴ In salvation there is no place whatsoever for human boasting and pride. God welcomes the humble and rejects the proud.⁵

HUMILITY BEFORE PEOPLE

Humility significantly affects the way we think about and act towards people. It is modest and self-effacing toward others. Humility understands that all talents, gifts, and successes are gifts from God,⁶ for which it is continually grateful and gives God the glory. Moreover, humility acknowledges that there are others whom God has gifted with greater gifts and capacities, for which it rejoices, not envies. Humility sees the worth and importance of others and rejoices.

A humble mind is a servant mind. Like our Lord Jesus, the humble stoop to wash the feet of others. Like the Good Samaritan, the humble kneel and sacrifice to help a fellow human in need, even the most lowly, despised person. As the Scripture commands, “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly” (Rom. 12:16). The humble can count others “more significant” than one’s self. Like Barnabas with Paul, the humble promote the gifts and positions of others, not just self (Acts 11:25-26; see also 9:26-28). The humble do not abuse authority and power. Humility also generates understanding, compassion, forbearance, and forgiveness for others’ faults and errors because a humble mind knows keenly its own weaknesses, sins, ignorance, and errors.

Furthermore, humility recognizes with deep gratitude all the good and perfect gifts of God. He has created us in his image, he loves us and values us and has redeemed us to be his own. He has made us sons and daughters, priests and saints, he has given us his Holy Spirit, gifted us with spiritual gifts to serve his people and reach the world with the gospel. He uses us in ways that far exceed our natural talents. The humble response to all such goodness is continuous gratitude and giving ourselves totally to his will and service.

In light of both our creatureliness/sinfulness and our high calling as God’s beloved children, the Scripture directs us to think objectively and truthfully about ourselves. Paul, in a call to humility, writes, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom. 12:3). As prideful creatures we are prone to think too highly of ourselves, of our gifts, our intelligence, our spirituality, and even our humility. But this is self-deception. We can also think too lowly of ourselves, and gravel in our nothingness, and fall prey to false humility. This too is a wrong view of who we really are as God’s new creation.

Scripture thus teaches us to think with “sober judgment” of ourselves. To do this we must adjust our thinking to agree with what God says of us in his Word. Only then can we be balanced, objective, and humble-minded. True humility inflicts a deathblow to all selfish ambition and empty conceit.

Below are examples of similar uses of the word humility and its related terms in the New Testament:

Humility (noun: *tapeinophrosynē*)

You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with **all humility**.... (Acts 20:18-19)

⁴ Matt. 18:1-4; Luke 18:9-14; 1 Cor. 1:27-29.

⁵ Prov. 3:34; Isa. 2:11-17, 22; 66:2; 1 Cor. 1:28-29; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5.

⁶ John 3:27; 1 Cor. 4:7; 12:3.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with **all humility** and gentleness, with patience.... (Eph. 4:1-2)

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, **humility**, meekness, and patience.... (Col. 3:12)

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with **humility** toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)

Humble, Lowly (adjective: *tapeinos*)

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and **lowly** in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matt. 11:29)

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the **humble**. (1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6)

Humble (verb: *tapeinoō*)

Whoever **humbles** himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 18:4)

Whoever exalts himself will be **humbled**, and whoever **humbles** himself will be exalted. (Matt. 23:12; cf. Luke 14:11; 18:14)

Did I commit a sin in **humbling** myself so that you might be exalted? (2 Cor. 11:7)

And being found in human form, he **humbed** himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:8)

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you. (1 Peter 5:6; cf. James 4:10)

Humble (adjective: *tapeinophrōn*)

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a **humble mind**. (1 Peter 3:8)

As the New Testament writers show, humility is essential to unity in the church⁷ and *to tempering conflict, to resolving differences, to honestly hearing the other person, to seeing one's own faults, to submitting one to another, and to forgiving and reconciling*.

⁷Eph. 4:2; Phil. 2:3-5; James 4:1-10; 1 Peter 3:8.

A humble person is able to

- accept correction and rebuke,
- admit mistakes and errors,
- seek forgiveness,
- ask for help from others,
- promote the gifts of others,
- change when wrong,
- welcome reconciliation

The humble believer also

- doesn't have to know everything or have all the answers,
- doesn't always have to have his or her way,
- doesn't turn everything into competition to prove his or her intelligence,
- doesn't get defensive when questioned,
- doesn't boast of self or crave praise from others,
- doesn't show contempt for others,
- doesn't always demand his or her rights

Just as humility is foundational to our relationship with God (Matt. 5:3), it is foundational to preserving our relationships and solving our conflicts with our brothers and sisters in Christ.