

HUMILITY

PURSUING TRUE GREATNESS

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From³ the earliest days of Sovereign Grace Churches, there has been an emphasis placed upon the priority and pursuit of humility. This is not an emphasis unique to us or something we came up with, but an emphasis that God holds out for his people in Holy Scripture.

In Isaiah 66:1–2, we encounter these remarkable words:

Thus says the LORD: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

The Israelites had a lot going for them. They had a unique identity. They had the Torah. They had the Law of God, the Covenant, and the temple. But they lacked humility—they had allowed pride to flourish unchecked. So God draws their attention away from the temple and toward their hearts. He tells them that their preoccupation ought not to be with the grandeur of externals, but with the internal. “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2).

The Perils of Pride

Due to remaining sin, all of us are prone to pride. I do not consider myself a humble person, rather, I am a proud person pursuing humility by the grace of God. We must be aware of our pride, and we must be aware of the perils of pride. Pastors in particular must be aware that, as ministers of the gospel, pride has the potential in our lives to leverage itself through ministry, doing damage that extends far beyond our own families.

John Stott wrote this about pride: “At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is our greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.”⁴

³ A version of this article first appeared in Thomas K. Ascol, ed., *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2004). Used with Permission.

⁴ J.I. Packer & Loren Wilkinson, eds. *Alive to God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 119.

As best I can tell, pride was the first sin—among angels and among men. And it would appear that pride is the essence of all sin, as well as the sin God finds most offensive. The proud man heads up the list of God's seven hated abominations in Proverbs 6. When referring to pride, the Bible uses words like hate, abomination, and detestable. Stronger language is simply not available.

Besides the things I “hate” in the humorous sense—things like cottage cheese and professional sports teams from New York—I do in all seriousness genuinely hate sin and evil, and the damage sin does in the world. But set my hatred side by side with the supremely pure, holy, and unalterable hatred that God has for the sin of pride, and they will appear as nothing but casual disinclinations. We simply cannot overstate how deeply God detests and abhors pride.

Why does God so hate pride? Charles Bridges summed it up well, “Pride lifts up the heart against God. It contends for the supremacy with him.”⁵ Pride is an attitude of self-sufficiency and independence toward God and of self-righteousness and superiority toward others. It robs God of the honor and glory due him. It takes many forms but has only one goal: self-glorification. No wonder then that God opposes the proud (1 Pet. 5:5).

Oh, the perils of pride! I've seen it ruin pastors, marriages, families, relationships, churches—all this among sincere believers. But for all the very real perils of pride, there is also the rich promise of humility. For our God is not only passionately opposed to pride; he is decisively drawn to humility. The omniscient One is aware of all things—nothing escapes his notice—yet he actively searches for one thing. His attention is uniquely drawn to humility: “This is the one to whom I will look.” The humble man will receive grace, and not opposition, because his motive is to glorify God, not himself. God will always support and extend favor to a humble man who pursues God's will.

The Application of Truth

Imagine a number of churches, each one led by called, gifted, and committed pastors. Each one holding a high view of Scripture and of sound doctrine. Each one devoted to the centrality of the gospel and filled with committed, servant-hearted believers who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity. Over time, some of these churches thrive, but some do not. Why is that? At the risk of oversimplifying, I think I know the answer.

Many people, of course, believe the Bible. Many pastors know it extremely well. Many recognize that it is our only truly reliable guide for life and faith. But strong churches—that is, churches in which the members are growing in sanctification and increasingly glorifying God in their public and private lives—are churches in which the pastors do not merely teach sound doctrine. They also lead in and model the consistent application of biblical truth to all of life.

⁵ Charles Bridges, *The Commentary on Proverbs* (reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 228.

So this I can say with full confidence: over the decades, a pastor's ministry will be fruitful only to the extent that we have both taught Scripture accurately and applied it consistently to ourselves, our families, our fellow elders, and the churches we serve. It is not biblical truth alone that builds effective churches. It is, by God's grace, the application of biblical truth.

The proper application of Scripture will always emphasize the weakening of pride (our greatest enemy) and the cultivation of humility (our greatest friend). I'm convinced this will make a huge difference in our churches.

How to Cultivate Humility

Christians have a desire to tremble at God's Word. Surely this phrase speaks of something far beyond mere mental assent. The proud man may respect God's Word, he may believe it, he may teach it, but to tremble before it is a mark of the humble. So, what practical steps can Christians take to cultivate humility and thus tremble at God's Word?

The Attributes of God

First, study the attributes of God. Focus especially on God's incommunicable attributes, those having no reflection or illustration in man or indeed anywhere in creation. (Note how, in the Isaiah 66 passage I quoted, God draws our attention to his unique and unparalleled greatness.)

Consider, for example, that God is infinite. He has no boundaries, no edges. He is also omnipresent. He has no center, no one point of concentration, no single place where his essence is located, for he is fully and equally present everywhere—within creation and beyond it. *New Bible Dictionary* says, "When we say that God is infinite spirit, we pass completely out of the reach of our experience."⁶

Truly, this is the deep end of the theological pool. This infinite One is self-existent and self-sufficient. Everything in creation, from you and me, to the heavenly beings, to the atoms of gas in deepest space, is in complete dependence on God's sustaining attention for mere moment-by-moment existence. But before time, through all of time, and outside of time, God depends ever and only upon himself. We are like the grass that withers and fades, but he alone possesses the power of sheer being. As Matthew Henry wrote,

The greatest and best men in the world must say "By the grace of God I am what I am." But God says absolutely—and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say—"I am that I am."⁷

⁶ J.D. Douglas, et al., (eds.), *New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1962), 427.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), 284 [Exodus 3:14].

Such contemplation will inevitably weaken our pride. The greater our awareness of the difference between ourselves and God, the more we will experience and express humility. How good of God to offer us in his Word a glimpse of his unfathomable other-ness, that we might have it as an unerring aid to humility!

Stay Near the Cross

Second, never stray from the cross. Live as one who continually surveys—and from close range—the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died. I can do no more, and I can surely do no better, than to draw your attention to the centrality of our Savior's sacrifice.

A friend told me of an opportunity he once had to interview Carl Henry, a truly humble man who is perhaps the foremost evangelical scholar of the latter half of the twentieth century. He asked Dr. Henry, then in his late seventies, how he had remained so humble for so many decades. Dr. Henry replied, "How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?" In his book *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott says, "The cross does not flatter us, the cross undermines our self-righteousness. We can stand before it only with a bowed head and a broken spirit."⁸

The Doctrines of Grace

Third, study the doctrines of grace. As you immerse yourself in the study of election, calling, justification, and perseverance, you will be reminded that all we have and all we are as Christians begins with God, ends with God, and depends on God. These rich doctrines leave no room for self-congratulation. Mark Webb writes,

God intentionally designed salvation so that no man can boast of it. He didn't merely arrange it so that boasting would be discouraged or kept to a minimum. He planned it so that boasting would be absolutely excluded. Election does precisely that.⁹

Personal arrogance and a true appreciation of reformation theology cannot long co-exist; truth will drive out the lie of pride.

The Doctrine of Sin

Fourth, study the doctrine of sin. The best way to prepare for a study of sin is first to study God's holiness, for there and there alone do we encounter the complete absence of sin. Search the Scriptures thoroughly on the topic, and read R.C. Sproul's *The Holiness of God*. Then, when you begin to study the doctrine of sin itself, you will bring to the task a proper perspective. For your reading here, none can improve upon John Owen, especially *Temptation and Sin* in Volume Six of his collected works. An abridged version is available as a book

⁸ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 12.

⁹ Mark Webb, "What Difference Does it Make?" *Reformation & Revival Journal* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1994)

titled *Sin and Temptation*. Also, Kris Lundgaard's *The Enemy Within* is essentially a simplified and modernized interpretation of Owen's work that is nevertheless quite effective.

As you study the doctrine of sin, be sure to do so in light of the cross of Christ, being careful to apply and celebrate the grace of God. This is crucial, because it is possible to teach this doctrine and not reveal the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It takes great skill to teach the doctrine of sin in a way that reveals, rather than obscures, the grace of Christ. Sinclair Ferguson captures this challenge:

Only by seeing our sin do we come to see the need for and wonder of grace. But exposing sin is not the same thing as unveiling and applying grace. We must be familiar with and exponents of its multifaceted power, and know how to apply it to a variety of spiritual conditions.

Truth to tell, exposing sin is easier than applying grace; for, alas, we are more intimate with the former than we sometimes are with the latter. Therein lies our weakness.¹⁰

So we must handle the doctrine of sin with great care, and in a manner that shows the stunning magnitude and power of the grace of Christ. But we must not avoid the doctrine of sin—it is of immeasurable value to our churches, and in cultivating humility in our lives.

Confession and Correction

Fifth, we pursue humility by applying the doctrine of sin through confession and inviting correction. Noting that all men are sinners, Mike Renihan further observes, “Sinners fall into two more distinct classes: those who admit their sin and those who don't. Those who admit themselves to be sinners fall into two more classes: those who do something about it and those who do not.”¹¹ The humble Christian is the man or woman who does something about it, especially through confession and the pursuit of correction.

It's not difficult to acknowledge one's pervasive depravity. What's difficult is specifically to confess an area of personal depravity. Obviously, one must first confess sins to God. But we are also called to confess, as appropriate, to individuals.

I feel strongly that every pastor, even in the smallest church, must have a team of men to whom he is accountable. These are men to be transparent with, to whom we confess our sins freely and regularly. Let these confessions be full and specific, not selective and partial. Confess overt acts of sin as well as present temptations, and let grace and forgiveness be abundant. It's a sad truth that whenever a pastor disqualifies himself from ministry through a failure of personal character, a long-standing lack of confession has invariably been present.

¹⁰ Sinclair Ferguson, “A Preacher's Decalogue Part II,” *Reformation21*, (accessed March 27, 2009).

¹¹ Mike Renihan, “A Pastor's Pride and Joy.” *TableTalk* (July 1999), 53.

Another vital means of applying the doctrine of sin to our own lives is to invite and pursue correction in areas of character. People in our lives should feel truly welcome to point out to us any instance in which it appears you have behaved sinfully—or indeed, any area in which you could simply be doing a better job. Would your wife, your friends, and those who serve with you in your church say you are easy to entreat?

Again, as we walk in confession and invite correction, we must ensure that we do so in a way that contributes to a culture of grace. Every confession of sin is an opportunity to marvel at the grace of God in the gospel.

Practices to Consider

For years I have had a list of daily practices as I seek to grow in humility. It is a great help in the pursuit of humility to observe some set of concrete, tangible practices. Here are the ones that, by God's grace, have proven effective for me. I'm not encouraging any strict emulation of these. The principle of pursuing humility can be expressed in many ways, and it is important to distinguish biblical principles from individual practices. I offer these practices for your consideration and, I hope, for your provocation. Custom-design your own list. But for the sake of your family and your church, be sure to move from general principles to specific practices.

1. Begin the day acknowledging your dependence upon God, your need for God, and your confidence in God. I'm talking the first thoughts of the day. When that alarm goes off, I'm immediately seeking to direct my heart to God that I might express my dependence on him. I continue purposefully to cultivate this attitude as I prepare for the day. If not, my thoughts will—without fail—drift toward self-reliance.

2. As you turn your thoughts to God, set the tone for the day by expressing gratefulness to him. “Thankfulness is a soil in which pride does not easily grow.”¹² And thankfulness begins with the gospel. The best way I have found to battle the forgetfulness and distractions that so easily hinder our gratitude is—as Jerry Bridges says—to preach the gospel to yourself every day. So begin each day doing just that, and then direct your gratitude to God because of the gospel.

As the day progresses, purpose to recognize and express gratitude for the innumerable “Post-It notes” that God places around us to remind us of his grace. It is said of Matthew Henry that to encounter him was to become aware of an alert and thankful observer of answered prayer. I want to be like that. Ingratitude is the mark of a proud man but to consistently express thankfulness is to deal blow after mortifying blow to my self-glorifying arrogance.

3. Practice the spiritual disciplines every day. The spiritual disciplines are a daily declaration and demonstration of my need for God and my dependence on him. I believe that our inconsistency in practicing

¹² Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* (London: SPCK, 1972), 79.

the spiritual disciplines is not due primarily to an absence of self-discipline, but to the presence of self-sufficiency.

4. Seize your daily commute, if you have one, to memorize and meditate on Scripture. When William Wilberforce was serving in the House of Commons, he used his daily one-mile walk from his home to Parliament to recite from memory the whole of Psalm 119. Now that is time well spent.

5. All day long, at the moment you become aware of burdensome cares, cast them upon the Lord, who cares for you. Where there is worry and anxiety, there is the pride of self-reliance. The humble man, though he may be responsible for many things, is free of care—he is care-free. His life is characterized by joy and peace, for it is impossible to be worried while trusting in the Sovereign One.

6. When my work day concludes, instead of simply leaving for home, I seize the opportunity to cultivate humility. No matter how "successful" or "unsuccessful" my day has been (in my limited estimation), I acknowledge that God is the only One who ever perfectly completes his daily to-do list, and I commit all that remains undone to his safe keeping. Tomorrow, I'll come back and, by his grace, try again.

7. At the end of the day, I seek to transfer all glory to God. Puritan Thomas Watson wrote, "When we have done anything praiseworthy we must hide ourselves under the veil of humility and transfer the glory of all we have done to God."¹³ Thankful for such precious advice, I take a few moments in the evening just to mentally review the day. For every evidence of fruitfulness or progress I've witnessed or experienced that day, I try to specifically acknowledge to God the undeniable fact that He alone is responsible.

As a pastor, I may be a means of grace in the lives of others, but I can't save anyone! I can't convict anyone of sin or bring a soul to repentance. I have no power in me to effect sanctification in anyone's life. Our churches are testimonies to the greatness and graciousness of God—not monuments to our leadership and preaching.

On one occasion when Charles Spurgeon was addressing his Pastors College students, he told them, "Your ministry is poor enough. Everybody knows it, and you ought to know it most of all."¹⁴ Now, was he pointing out that this class of students was particularly incompetent? Not at all. He went on to inform them that preaching is ever and only effective because God keeps His promise that His Word shall not return void. Isaiah acknowledged to God, "You have indeed done for us all our works" (Isa. 26:12), and this, as *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes, is "a profound truth, blessedly destructive of spiritual pride."¹⁵ God is the prime mover behind every means of grace. Soli Deo Gloria!

¹³ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 17.

¹⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 194.

¹⁵ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 165.

8. Finally, before going to sleep at night, I acknowledge that sleep is a gift from the Creator to the creature. I don't just passively fall asleep. I seize that daily opportunity to weaken pride and cultivate humility by acknowledging him who neither slumbers nor sleeps. Sleep, for me, is a daily reminder that I am far from self-sufficient. Let me put it this way: I have a desperate, irreversible, physiological need to spend a substantial portion of every twenty-four hours in a state of mental and physical incapacity, utterly helpless and completely useless. Is this not comical? God then uses this time to strengthen and restore me for another day—a day in which I will invariably fail to obey him fully, yet by grace he will somehow redeem my actions to produce a measure of fruitfulness. How can this not be humbling?

I pray that these thoughts will inspire you to establish patterns of your own that will serve you for the rest of your life, as these have served me.

Motivated by Grace

So let us devote ourselves daily to the purposeful application of Scripture, that we might avoid the perils of pride and experience the promise of humility. And let us do so motivated by grace. For however intentional our efforts, and however much we might see God's grace at work in sanctification, we do not rest in our accomplishments or good intentions as if they could ever earn us anything before a Holy God. We claim no merit in what we do. Rather, we rest in the finished work of the Savior. We are God's and enjoy his favor only because Another has perfectly fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the law.

Jesus Christ is the only One who has ever been perfectly humble, completely contrite in spirit, and fully observant of what it means to tremble at God's Word. We rest ultimately in him—in his perfect life and substitutionary sacrifice for our sins.