The Blessing of Humility

James 4:6

We began our short series last week by quoting John Stott who said that in every moment of our growth as a Christian, pride is always our greatest enemy and humility is always our greatest friend. I love that quote and feel that in my life everyday. Don’t you? Last week, we spent time talking about the enemy. Pride is our enemy and it destroys us from the inside out. My prayer is that the fruits of pride we shared last week were helpful in revealing areas in your life where pride is winning the battle.

This week, I want to talk about our greatest friend. Humility. This proves to be much more difficult than talking about pride. Pride is easy, for I can speak from personal experience much more often than I can speak about humility. It’s hard. But if you remember from James 4:6, we are told, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Over the next two weeks, I want to explore the depths of humility, by exploring this virtue this week and then next week talk about the grace God gives to those who are humble.

Humility is probably the greatest virtue needed in our world today. One of the early church fathers, John Chrysostom (who was nicknamed “the golden tongue for his preaching gift), once said, “Humility is the root, mother, nurse, foundation, and bond of all virtue.” He meant that it is what all other virtues are built upon. Without humility, there is no love; there is no forgiveness; there is no courage, or any other virtue. Without humility, they simply become mirages of what they are to be.

Jonathan Edwards once said, “We must view humility as one of the most essential things that characterizes true Christianity.” His point is that it should be the dominant characteristic of the True Christian. After all, it is the character quality we learn most from our Savior, Jesus Christ, as He came to this earth. Just think about that, the One person to ever lived who never needed to be humble (for He was all that), is the One who exemplifies humility for us. And if a Christian is a follower of Jesus, we would expect that we would follow Him in this virtue.

One thing is for certain. God cares for the humble person. He is drawn to the humble. James tells us that He gives grace to the humble, which is amazing. So amazing that it almost makes it out to be that humility is
a work of merit that earns us God’s favor. We will explore this concept more next week, but let’s just realize that if grace is given for something we do, then it no longer is grace. You get that, right? In addition, if humility is something we do to gain something, then it’s no longer humility. So, there must be something else meant here.

The imagery James uses is set in contrast to God opposing the proud. Remember, we said that means God lines Himself up on the opposite side of the battlefield from the proud person. And so in contrast to that, He gives grace to the humble person. If we understand the imagery here, He is not on the other side of the battlefield; He is standing next to the humble man giving support. He is not opposing the humble person, but in the bunker guarding and protecting the humble man.

In the OT, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said, “This is the one to whom I look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (66:2). This is an amazing statement and probably helps us understand the grace that God extends toward those who are humble. God does not help those who help themselves. He extends grace to those who do not think they deserve it. He is looking for the humble. He is looking for those who are contrite in spirit. He is looking for those who do not think they deserve it. He is looking for those who want to bow in humble worship and service to Him as the King!

These are great thoughts that are only going to expand in our mind once we define what the Bible means by humility. The easy definition for humility is to say that it is the absence of pride. Whatever pride is, humility is doing the opposite. This is true. We saw last week that the word James uses of pride is “someone who shows himself beyond.” It is for the person who thinks they are better than someone else; beyond someone else.

In contrast, the word James uses for humility is a word rooted in a condition of lowliness or poverty. It is the belief that you are not beyond someone else, but are lowly. It is a word often used in the context of poverty. The poor person. But of course, he is not talking in financial terms here, but in a spirit of attitude toward God and others. It also has the idea of insignificant or weak. In the ancient world, this word was often used of the slave, who had nothing and was in a state of submission to his master.
Now, it is possible that when we define humility in this way, it can lead us to the wrong conclusions of what this virtue actually means. There are many wrong ideas of humility that James and the Lord does not mean. There are many ideas that a definition of “lowliness and poverty” could wrongly lead us toward. Let me share a few of them. These are what Humility is Not . . .

_First, Humility is not denying the gifts and graces God has given_. Without a doubt, everyone here is uniquely gifted by the Lord. For some, God has made you athletic. For others, He has made you smart. Still others, He has graced you with good looks. For all Christians, He has given you gifts to be used in the church. Humility is not denying that God has made you the way He made you. It is not denying that God has gifted you with graces to be used for His glory.

Honestly, it is a type of false humility to deny that God has made you the way He made you for His glory. It may be pride to think highly of yourself in those things, but it may also be pride to deny that He has gifted you, especially if you say claim that to gain attention from others. Humility is not the denying of how He has called you to serve and help others in the body of Christ.

_Second, Humility is not being a coward_. It is not weakness. Humility is not the opposite of courage, but the root of courage. Think of the Apostles at the beginning of the church in the beginning of the book of Acts. They act with great courage, but are not proud. They are humble in their assessment of themselves, but they refuse to be pushed over by the governing authorities who tell them to never talk about Jesus. They are courageous and humble.

Humility does not mean that you have to be a doormat to abuse. In seeking to be humble, we never say, “Well, I guess I’m supposed to be lowly and so if someone wants to take advantage of me, I should let them do it.” That’s not humility. Yes, humility would turn the other cheek, but it does not automatically look to be taken advantage of. But when you are taken advantage of, humility doesn’t seek revenge, but trusts in the Lord to care for them.

_Third, Humility is not a lack of direction, desire, and godly ambition_. It is not wrong to want to be used of God or desire to see the Kingdom of God advanced. God wants to use us to do great things for him. God is

---

not glorified by a loosing or defeatist mentality. It is not that to be humble, we have to be locked into a pursuit of mediocrity. That’s simply not the truth. Let’s not forget who is mentioned in the Bible as the humble examples . . .

*Moses.* He is said to be the most humble man on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3). Did he lack direction? Did he lack desire or godly ambition? Maybe at first, but He was firm in God’s call to His life and stepped forward and led Israel out of Egypt and then through the wilderness, receiving the Law from God and giving it to His people. In fact, he is only called humble after he does these things, not before when he was scared to death to be the leader God wanted him to be. He is called humble after accomplishing great things for God, not before when he was scared to do anything.

And then there’s the obvious example,* Jesus.* Obviously, He epitomizes humility. He is humility in action. He defines it for us. He shows us what it means to be humble. And did He lack direction, desire, or ambition? Of course not. He came to this earth for a very special purpose and He fulfilled that purpose.

And so let’s not define humility as sitting on the sidelines, scared that if we do something we will find ourselves proud. We already face pride, and that’s probably a proud statement itself as its focused on self instead of God or others. Let’s pursue excellence, but not with the motivation of calling attention to self or trying to impress people.

There are many other examples we could give for what humility is not. But maybe its time to get to what it is. How should we define humility? My favorite definition of humility is the way C.J. Mahaney’s defines it in his book on this topic. He says,

*“Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness.”*

When we talk about humility, it begins with our relationship with God. It begins with our understanding that He is holy and we are not. Remember, pride is trying to remove God from His throne so that we can sit on it. We want the world to revolve around our life. Or maybe we expect that it should. But humility rightly assesses ourselves in the light that God is holy. He is the One who is on the throne. We are sinful and don’t deserve the throne. We are not the ones ruling the universe.
The Puritan, Thomas Brooks, once said, “Remember this—all the sighing, mourning, sobbing, and complaining in the world, does not so undeniably evidence a man to be humble, as his overlooking his own righteousness, and living really and purely upon the righteousness of Christ.”

Humility is not what we say. It doesn’t matter that we say or think we are humble, even if the words come with mourning and sobbing. What really tells a person they are humble is that they repent of their own self-righteousness and rely upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

What does this mean? It means that the humble person realizes that going to church is not going to save them. It means that the goal is not to live a good life hoping that by what we do, God will think favorably upon us. That only produces pride as we do more and more good things. We then think that God owes us, as if He is indebted to us. The humble person realizes that they cannot do anything to gain eternal life and so they cast themselves at the foot of the cross, begging God to do the work in their life.

The humble person is the description of the first beatitude given by Jesus: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). To be poor in spirit is to be a beggar. It is someone who realizes they cannot do it on their own. Their only hope of survival is to beg someone to help them. The Kingdom of God is filled with people who truly believe and confess that they acknowledge that they cannot enter upon their own merit. They beg for help, because they know in their own spirit, they cannot meet the standards of God. They rightly assess themselves in the light of God’s holiness and their sinfulness.

Maybe one of the best examples of humility as set in contrast with pride in our relationship with God and others is found in . . .

Luke 18:9–14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”
tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisee thinks he can enter the kingdom on his own two feet with all that He does in life. He thinks he’s all that. And in so doing, he does not honestly assess his standing before a holy God. But the tax collector does not think the same way. He comes begging for mercy, because he knows that he cannot do it on his own. He knows that he needs God to act or else He is helpless.

Humility is the ability to accurately see our place in this universe. And once we see this with crystal clarity, it affects every area of our life. Ultimately, humility before God is evidenced in how we treat other people. It is shown in our humility before others. The humble person is generally thought to be unpretentious and modest: someone who does not think that he or she is better or more important than others. The person who thinks they are better than someone else is the person who has not wrestled accurately with their standing before a holy God!

This is humility. This is the attitude we are told that God gives grace towards. He gives grace to those with this attitude of helplessness. When we cast ourselves at the foot of the cross begging for help, it is there we find grace. And so now, I guess the most pressing question is this: Is this virtue found in our life? Is this us? And how would we know? How can we know if we are humble?

In many ways, it is much easier to point out the fruits of pride than it is to see the fruits of humility. Discovering the fruits of humility is a bit tricky. On the one hand, we want to see where and how humility shows up in our life, but when we find it, does it produce pride that we are humble? I mean, should we make a list and then at the end of the list go, “Wow, I guess I’m more humble than I thought I was. Cool.”

I really like what Martin Luther once said: “True humility does not know that it is humble. If it did, it would be proud from the contemplation of so fine a virtue.” And so, as we spend the last few minutes trying to point out areas in which we see humility, let us walk with great caution that we don’t succumb to pride in our humility. I know last week, I gave you 20 of the 50 Fruits of pride I had on my list. This week, let me just give you 10 Evidences of Humility.
1. I am constantly growing in my trust in God for everything in my life.

If we define humility as the ability to assess ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness, then we know we need help. And if we need help, we will grow constantly in our trust in God for everything in our life. Just think about how proud it is to think that you need to have everything in your life all wrapped up and under your control? As if it depends on you? In everything? Really?

Humility says that I’m not in control, but He is. And since He is in control and I know God to be good and perfect and holy and right in everything He does, then I can live my life in humble dependence upon Him. I can trust Him in my marriage; I can trust Him with my children; I can trust Him in my job; I can trust Him with the life of my parents who are growing older. I can trust Him in all things.

2. I am quick to repent when my sin is revealed to me.

Pride holds onto sin; humility repents of it. I want to be fair, often there are sins that we don’t know we are committing. Let’s call them sins of ignorance, which might be many of the sins of pride. But once someone comes to us and points them out, humility bows down to the foot of the cross to repent. Humility sees God as holy. Humility sees itself as sinful. It doesn’t rationalize. It doesn’t generalize by saying things like, “Well, everyone is a sinner.” Humility runs to the foot of the cross where it finds the grace it longs for.

3. I find it easier to ask for forgiveness than it used to be.

There’s one thing I’ve noticed over the years of ministry. And maybe I shouldn’t say ministry, but just life. It can be very difficult to ask someone for forgiveness. Maybe it is embarrassment. Maybe it’s shame. Maybe its just the effects of pride in our heart. But its hard to ask someone to forgive you.

Even when we do it, we usually make it as easy as we can. When we tell our children they need to seek forgiveness for what they did to their sibling, often, it becomes “I’m sorry.” Sometimes, not even the “I’m.” Just “sorry.” That’s easy. But it is way more difficult to look someone in the eye and say, “I am sorry I hurt you, will you forgive me.” But that’s what humility does. And it does it with increasing regularity in a persons life. After all, let’s not forget that if we define humility as
honestly assessing ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness. And so if we believe that God is holy and we are sinful, and we have run to the foot of the cross to receive grace and mercy, who cares what other people think of us? The only reason why we don’t ask for forgiveness or seek forgiveness is because we don’t want to admit we are weak people. You are. I am. But God isn’t. Praise Him!

4. I desire for God to get all the credit for anything He allows me to accomplish on this earth.

Why do we do the things we do? What is our goal? What is our goal in serving in the church? When something happens in our arena of service where we no longer are serving in the same capacity . . . for whatever reason, how do we respond? What is our goal in our occupations? What is our goal in raising our children, or when our kids compete in their sporting events? Is it to the glory of the name on the back of the jersey? Do we hope to make a name for ourselves? Or can we, with sincere honesty, say with the Psalmist . . .

Psalm 115:1 → “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!”

Listen, I really hope and pray that when I close my eyes at the end of my life, I can say that. I can’t always say that today. I can say I want to desire God to get all the credit, but there are times when I would love to be recognized. Don’t you feel that a bit? But if, prayerfully when, we find ourselves living a life that moves and acts for the glory of God’s name and not our own, we are on the precipice of humility.

5. I think highly of my God.

Humility sees myself in light of my God. And so I know there may be steps towards humility when I think very highly of my God. I know that He is in control of all things. I know that He is sovereign over all things, including myself. I know there is nothing that He cannot do. I know what the Bible says so clearly and often . . .

2 Chronicles 20:6 → “O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you.”

Or even just two verses after we say, “Not to us, O Lord” . . .
Psalm 115:3 \(\rightarrow\) “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”

Do you think big thoughts of God? Or small feeble thoughts? Do you think of Him as the almighty Creator of all there is? Go out on a starry night and get a sense of how large He is for creating all of this and fall on your face in humble appreciation of how amazing He is.

6. I am thankful.

It is impossible to be humble and not thankful. “But what about those bad things that happen to me, are you saying I shouldn’t complain about them or feel bad for myself about them?” That’s exactly what I’m saying. Well, at least the humble person won’t gripe and complain.

Don’t miss what I’m saying. I’m not saying you shouldn’t feel pain. I’m not saying that the humble person isn’t hurt. But what I am saying is that they give thanks in the good and the bad. They are able to keep a perspective at what God is doing in this life. The humble person receives from the Lord the blessings and challenges.

7. I desire to serve others.

The proud person is all about themselves. The humble person serves others. The humble person takes the example of Jesus to reach out and move towards other people, thinking of their needs as more important than yourself.

Philippians 2:3–4 \(\rightarrow\) “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others.”

Do you know what follow this? It’s the example of Jesus Christ. Humility not only puts others before you, it serves them. Humility is like the mother who has no money and is starving and finds a piece of bread and gives it to her kids instead of eating it herself. Although, that might seem easy, so let’s put that illustration of humility as doing to someone not in your family. Humility does that to someone they don’t love like their child.

8. I rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.
Romans 12:15–16 → “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.”

Humility is excited and happy when good things happen to others. They are not bitter. They are not upset at God that those things aren’t happening to them. They are excited for the blessings God sends to others. And they are never happy when bad things happen to others.

9. I am open to be taught

Humility never sees itself as having arrived. Humility says I can learn from anyone. Humility says that I want to learn; I need to learn; so please teach me. In fact, I should say that humility is not open to be taught, but seeks teaching. They want to hear what God has to say to them. They are eager for His Word. They do not make excuses about being tired, for they know that God’s Word holds the power of life. So they cling to it for their life.

10. I joyfully put myself in situations where I’m not in charge.

Are you ever in a situation in which you are not in charge? For some of you, your entire life is lived in submission. But others of you, there’s rarely a time in which you are not in charge. And you like it. Could I gently advise you that it is really good for your pride to put yourself in situations in which you are not in charge. Humility seeks that out because humility knows that it is not all that.

Can I just tell you that is one main reason why I believe God designed a system of church government with a plurality of elders. I know there are some churches and organizations that would disagree with this, as they see the senior pastor as the elder and the one in charge. I can’t live there, for my pride wants that too much. I need the elders in my life to say and do things and push back to me at times. So does Luke. It is good to my soul.

God gives grace to the humble. I pray we seek it this week. I pray we take some time to honestly assess ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness. For His glory and our good.