

Humble Yourselves...

In the previous lessons, we have established two important points that we want to explore in more detail in this study:

1. There is a need to grow to be more like Christ.
2. To become more like Christ, we must humble ourselves.

We want to, therefore, consider how the New Testament scriptures emphasize the need for us to humble ourselves before God, and how Christ is the perfect example for this humility. When we become more like Him, we will become more humble before God!

James, as he wrote on this particular topic quoted the following Proverb in James 4:6:

Surely He scorns the scornful, But gives grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34).

His conclusion was:

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up (James 4:10).

There is a direct correlation between our willingness to humble ourselves and God's willingness to "lift you up." Peter cited the same idea, and quoted from the same Proverb when giving instructions for Christians to submit themselves to one another, which would be the result of them submitting themselves to God:

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

Even Jesus, in His own teachings, emphasized the same point:

But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:11–12).

This principle makes it clear that the plan that God has for His people will make them far different than anyone else around them. They will stand out, and be peculiar (as we noted in the last lesson of our study). Choosing to humble oneself before God, and before other people is not the mindset that will cause one to be exalted in the world around him. Just the opposite is often the case. So, choosing to humble yourself seems counterintuitive to success. But, as we will see, God's kingdom is vastly different than what is considered normal.

The Disciples of Jesus...

Jesus' disciples had to learn humility. They had to change their way of thinking from the worldly perspective to the godly perspective. There were a couple of instances in which the disciples argued over who they thought was the greatest in this new kingdom Jesus was ushering in. They were convinced that they were going to be given places of great honor in His kingdom. They still had their focus on the physical, rather than the spiritual. Jesus had to show them that His kingdom was going to be different, and that they had to change the way they thought about things!

Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me. (Mark 9:33–37).

Jesus' teaching made it clear that for one to be great in the kingdom of Heaven, he had to make the choice to humble himself before God and before his fellow man. He could not be seeking to rule, but rather to serve.

Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves (Luke 22:24–27).

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:1–12).

These disciples had to realize that God intended for them to become servants. They had to learn to humble themselves, and submit themselves to His instructions. This would include serving brethren. Rather than seeking preeminence in the church, the true people of God will seek to serve others.

Jesus, in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, addressed this need to humble oneself. In this parable, Jesus spoke of one who trusted in himself, that is, one who was puffed up in his own abilities to be righteous (self-righteous).

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:9–14).

Without humbling oneself, we cannot possibly serve God as He intends. One who refuses to humble himself before God, and before his brethren does not look like the Christian of the New Testament. To choose this type of humility goes against everything that feels natural to us. But, when we look at the instructions of the New Testament, we often find that what feels right to us is not what God has instructed!

We have a responsibility to not only humble ourselves before God, but also before our brethren. We are told that we are to submit to one another. This is an idea that is closely related to that of humility. Consider just a few instances that scripture tells us to submit:

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:18–24).

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you (Hebrews 13:17).

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.” Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:5–7).

There are many more passages we could look at that emphasize the need to submit to one another. However, these illustrate the various roles that God intends His people to conform to if they want to be pleasing to Him. When we consider the ideas of submission and humility, we may struggle with understanding what is meant. While we can see the clear instructions, how do we know what those concepts look like in practical terms? We have not been left to wonder long, if we are willing to look at the example of Christ as given to us in scripture!

The example of Christ...

As we established in a previous lesson, our goal should be to grow to be more and more like Christ each and every day. The New Testament records for us what He was, and how we can be like Him. When it comes to humility, there is no greater example for us to conform to than Jesus. Paul wrote about how Jesus humbled Himself to take on the role that God planned:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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 interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:1–11 ESV).

Paul told his audience that they needed to have the same mind that Christ had; a mind of humility! Christ, if He had been looking out only for His own interests would never have come into this world, become a part of His own creation, and went through the suffering and death that He did. Paul said that Christ “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped...” The idea here is that He did not view the position He had as something to hold on to. He was willing to leave that position, and become something that would benefit all of mankind: He became a servant. He chose to humble

Himself so that He could bring salvation to all man, through the death on the cross. He went from a position in Heaven, equal in all respects to God the Father, to a position of submission to Him, in accordance with the plan they had devised for Man's salvation from the beginning of time.

This is the ultimate example of humility and submission. Through this example, we can see what God intends for all His people to be. We are to think like Christ, and thinking like Him will cause us to act like Him. How can we do that in practical terms? One of the best examples of putting these concepts into practice is found in John's gospel:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean." So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. "I do not speak concerning all of you. I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me.' Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He. Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. (John 13:1-20).

In this example, we see Jesus, the greatest of teachers, the very creator of the world, taking on the lowliest of positions to serve His disciples. If we consider the passages from earlier in our study, of the disciples arguing over who was the greatest among them, Jesus' example stands out even more drastically. They were concerned about rising through the ranks, and being the best. James and John even went so far as to request that they be given the best places beside Jesus in the kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). Here, Jesus showed them what it meant to be truly great in God's kingdom.

The task Jesus performed was that of the lowliest of servants. It is conceivable that the disciples, as they walked into that room and saw the provisions made for washing of feet, began to worry about who Jesus would assign to the despicable task. They were probably concerned that they would be appointed, and that by so doing Jesus would identify who He thought to be the lowliest of the disciples. We can imagine their shock and amazement when Jesus set about to do the task Himself! In fact, we can see from Peter's response that he was not ready to allow Jesus to take such a demeaning role! Ironically, none of the disciples volunteered to take Jesus' place, understanding that He should not be the one doing it!

We learn, from Jesus' example, what true humility and submission is. Not that we should do some ceremonial washing of feet, but rather that we should be willing to serve in whatever capacity is needed. There shouldn't ever be a task that we think is below us! The type of humility that God re-

quires is expressed by a willingness to do what would rarely come naturally to us. Jesus showed His humility by taking on the lowest of tasks, the responsibility of the lowest servant. By doing so, He made it clear to these disciples, and also to us, what God expects! We should want to be like Him, which means choosing to serve any time we can, even in circumstances that may not be pleasing to us!

It was the humility of Jesus that led Him to sacrifice Himself for us. Had He not been willing to truly humble Himself, He would never have been willing to make such a significant sacrifice for others. Remember what we saw earlier in Philippians chapter 2:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5–8)

This idea is also emphasized in the account of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. This man had been reading from the book of Isaiah about the Messiah that was to come. He saw this:

The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth. (Acts 8:32–33).

The idea conveyed here is that Jesus, through the humility He adopted, allowed his “justice” to be taken away. Through humility He allowed proper judgment to be taken from Him, so that He would die as that great sacrifice. Had He not humbled Himself, He would have fought and argued to escape the judgment that was about to be imposed on Him. It was not right, it was not good, it was not just. But, He humbled Himself before the Father to submit to the plan that had been devised from the beginning of time.

False Humility...

One danger that arises when discussing humility is that of false humility. Sometimes, rather than truly humbling ourselves before God, we try to act like we are humble. The problem with trying to act humble (rather than being humble) is that an act can only last so long. Eventually, our true self will make its appearance.

The scriptures warn against this type of false humility in a couple of ways. First, Paul addressed the idea of self abasement as being a show that does not lead to true righteousness:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:18–23).

The New American Standard Version translates the phrase “false humility” as “self-abasement.” The English Standard Version translates it as “asceticism.” Both indicate an outward showing of humility that is not indicative of true humility. How, for example, is the beating of one’s own body a show of humility? It is nothing more than a show for people around. These displays are the extreme of “false humility.” There are many ways today that people show a false humility. This problem is yet another

that is exasperated by the advent of social media. We have the ability to post online and tell everyone, without much effort, just how humble we are. This is often accomplished through the fine art of the “humble-brag.” This is a post that is designed to sound like we are humble, but in reality it brags about just how great we are. Make no mistake, this problem is not restrained to social media. We often find ways to introduce it into our everyday lives. It is easy for us to find ways to brag about what we have done, what we have accomplished, even while trying to act in a humble manner. True humility never puffs itself up. What we have done does not really matter. We should not be focusing on ourselves! As I was preparing for this lesson, I came upon an interesting word:

solipsism

noun [sol-ip-siz-uhm]

extreme preoccupation with and indulgence of one's feelings, desires, etc.; egoistic self-absorption.

This seems to be representative of our current society. We are so preoccupied with ourselves, that we cannot think about, or see others around us. While we try to act as if we are spiritual, in reality we are self centered, egotistical. We need to learn true humility, not the false humility that leads to putting on some kind of a show for others around us.

Second, Jesus spoke about hypocrisy. The term *hypocrite* actually means:

ὑποκριτής hypōkritēs, hoop-ok-ree-tace'; from 5271; an actor under an assumed character (stage-player), i.e. (fig.) a dissembler (“hypocrite”):— hypocrite.¹

This word was used of the actors on stage during a performance. The idea is that when we are a hypocrite, we are playing a role that is not true. We are putting on a show. So, when Jesus addressed people as *hypocrites*, He was identifying the fact that they were not what they appeared to be. Throughout Matthew 23, for example, Jesus declared, “Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” He would then identify how they had acted in one manner, but were really something else entirely. One of His most condemning declarations was this:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:27–28).

This play acting can be seen in displays of false humility. When we are “full of hypocrisy” we will put on a show for other people that we are humbling ourselves before God and men, but in the end the show comes to an end and our true character is revealed.

Humble yourselves...

We need to truly submit to God's will, and humble ourselves before Him. We cannot deceive Him into believing we have humbled ourselves if we are in fact playing the hypocrite instead. Learning humility is not an easy task. However, learning humility is essential for us to be obedient to God. We do not, that is we cannot, submit to God in obedience if we have not humbled ourselves. When we reject God's instructions for us, it is a direct sign that we have failed to humble ourselves before Him. If we fail to humble ourselves before Him, He will not “lift you up” (James 4:10, Philippians 2:8, Hebrews 5:8-9)! True humility always leads us to obedience. When we fail to obey, we are being self-centered (doing what we want) instead of being humble (submitting ourselves to God).

1 Strong, James. *The New Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words* 1996 : n. pag. *Print.*

Questions...

1. How does the New Testament teaching about humility contrast with the typically accepted ideas of how we become successful in our society today?
2. How did the disciples of Jesus show that they struggled with the concept of humility?
3. How does one become great in the kingdom of God? Is this how one becomes great in the kingdom of men?
4. Give a few examples of how Jesus modeled humility for His disciples.
5. What is false humility? How might false humility be displayed today?
6. What is asceticism? How has this concept crept into Christianity historically? What might be some modern manifestations of this idea?
7. What does the word *hypocrite* mean? How might hypocrisy be expressed today?

