

First Peter, No. 26 “Humility”

1 Peter 5:5-7

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We mentioned last time that humility was an essential qualification for a leader in the church. But Peter goes on to say that it is what every Christian needs both as an attitude in the heart and as the practice of one’s life.

Text Comment

- v. 5 Why do just those who are younger need to be subject to the elders? Perhaps young people as a class have a special problem with such submission. There is reason to believe that, surely, as young people, having reached a point in their lives when they are making their own decisions resent having exchanged – or so it may seem to them – one set of parents for another. As one commentator reminds us, “We didn’t invent the generation gap!” [Clowney, 209] In any case, the next two sentences will indicate that the younger set are not the only ones who are summoned to humility and a spirit of servanthood. It is the calling of every believer, because such humility is essential for the blessing of God.

One cannot be sure of such things, to be sure, but the verb the ESV translates “clothe yourselves” means more literally “tie something on oneself.” Was Peter remembering the Lord in the Upper Room who “tied a towel around his waist” when he washed his disciples’ feet? The word isn’t the same, but that connection may certainly have occurred to Peter.

The gist of Peter’s words here is not difficult to grasp: he is telling them and us that the spirit of submission, of humbling oneself before others is not necessary only for the leaders of the church but is the calling of every Christian. It may be that Peter comes to this application because he is still thinking about these Christians’ suffering persecution for their faith. Humility in the first case for them, then, involves a submission of their hearts to God who has permitted them to undergo this trial. “Humble yourselves under God’s mighty hand” refers then to an acceptance of their lot, knowing that, ultimately, it is from God who could have protected them from persecution but, for reasons sufficient to him, has not done so. God knows best; you don’t. *The heartfelt recognition of that fact is itself humility!* So is repudiating the ideas that you know better than God or that you have some claim on God’s favor such that he should treat you better than he does. Peter is telling them, “Put your hand over your mouth and submit to him.” But, that sort of humility requires a more comprehensive lowliness of heart and spirit, the kind of humility that expresses itself as much toward other human beings as toward God himself. Hence the “toward one another” in v. 5. Humility, like the other central virtues of the Christian character, is all of a piece. You either have it or you don’t. No one truly loves God who does not love his brothers and sisters, the Apostle John tells us. And, in the same way, if you have humility, it shows up everywhere, not just at one point. A man who will be humble before God in times of trial, is a man who will be humble before others at any time. That seems to be the gist, adding verse 5 to verse 6.

This is made clearer by the fact that Peter has already made much of this sort of humility that betrays itself in the attitudes we demonstrate toward others. He has spoken already in this letter of

the submission of Christians to the government, slaves to their masters, wives to their husbands, the husbands' obligation to honor their wives, and, as well, of Christians toward unbelievers in 3:15. *Humility toward God will and must express itself in humility toward others.*

And, then, to encourage us in the difficult work of humbling ourselves before God and others, he reminds us that God promises his grace to the humble; he promises his children that those who express their lowliness toward others will in due time be lifted up. In other words, we can safely leave our fortunes in God's hands. We have no need to worry that our humility, our turning away from defending ourselves or making demands on our own behalf or asserting our own importance in various ways, will prove to be to our disadvantage. God will care for us and our reputations. It is better to have God in charge of lifting you up than trying to do it yourself! *That much is plain and it is hardly a message unique to Peter.* Hard as this counsel may be to practice in daily life its logic is irresistible.

We find this emphasis on humility, the Lord's love of it in the hearts and lives of his people, and his promise to reward it in one form or another countless times in the Bible.

“For this is what the High and Lofty One says –
 He who lives forever, whose name is holy:
 ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who
 is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the
 spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’ (Isaiah 57:15)

“This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite
 in spirit, and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2)

“You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.” (Psalm 18:27)

And many other texts like that. Now, we need to be absolutely clear on one point as we consider this summons to humility. It is, after all, easy enough to claim to be humble before God. We do that every Lord's Day when we confess our sins and sing our hymns. But what is true humility, and do we actually have it? How will anyone know? We certainly have met people – I have – who would take great offence were they to be accused of lacking humility, but who impress us rather with their pride. Worse yet, we know our own hearts only too well. We may want to be humble; we may want to be the people Peter describes here, but we know only too well how little real humility resides in our hearts. How quickly we rise to our own defense when we are criticized, even criticized justly, and how easily we look down on others as if we were in a position to cast the first stone! So, is there any way to tell how humble we actually are? Is there a way for us to judge ourselves and know ourselves in this respect? Well, says Peter, *in the Bible the truly humble spirit is measured primarily by humility toward other human beings*, for if we cannot be humble before the people we can see, how can we be humble before the far greater One whom we cannot see? I suspect this is why Peter, whose primary subject, given the larger context, seems to be our humility before God in times of trial, turns naturally and immediately to our humility before one another.

Now if we are ever to be truly humble people we need to begin clearing away our self-deceit. Let's begin with this: the Lord does not ask us to think less of us than we deserve, to feign humility, to

behave as though we were deserving of a place lower than others when in fact we know we are not. Humility in the Bible is never a pose! Paul puts it in a more homecoming way: we are not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. But, in putting it that way, he acknowledges our problem: we all tend to think of ourselves far more highly than we ought. We all have a higher view of ourselves than we deserve. *The advantage we all have in seeking true humility for ourselves is that, the facts being what they are, humility is only facing facts, being honest, and refusing to lie about ourselves to ourselves.* In other words, we all *ought to be* humble and the facts prove it so.

The Bible leaves us in no doubt that if we thought accurately and honestly about ourselves, we would be humble; we would immediately realize how absurd our pride actually is, and we would see not only the necessity but the goodness in behaving humbly before others. For the hard fact is that we are not worthy of the admiration, respect, and the worship of others that we crave and, in our heart of hearts, feel we deserve! This is something every Christian and ever generation of Christians must consider carefully, honestly, and repeatedly; such is our pride. It is something that Christians nowadays are less inclined to consider than in generations past. And it must be considered, thought through, stared in the face. What exactly?

That you and I are, in truth, deeply, shamefully, embarrassingly flawed people. Every one of us is; more profoundly and in more ways than any of us thinks or knows. And this is why humility is so essential to true Christian living. Humility in the Bible is fundamentally simple honesty about oneself, honesty that frees the soul to see its true relation both to God and to others. Honesty about oneself is essential to recognizing how deeply dependent we all are on the grace and mercy of God *because we do not deserve his favor at all*; because we have no claim on the favor of God. So little do we have a right to God's favor we don't even have a right to the favor of others. We think we do; but we don't. In this kind of brutal honesty about oneself a man or woman finds the freedom in which faith flourishes, as do love, gratitude, and obedience. No wonder Augustine should have replied, when asked to name the three cardinal virtues of the Christian heart: "humility, humility, humility."

You do agree that you are a deeply flawed human being, don't you? You do recognize – struggle as it may be to retain that recognition in the mind and heart – that your virtues are pathetic imitations of the real thing but your vices are genuine and real and bubble up unbidden from your proud and foolish heart? You do admit, don't you, that you entertain a far higher view of yourself than you deserve and that the passion with which you love yourself can scarcely be justified by the facts of your life? You do realize, don't you, that you think more highly of yourself than anyone else does? It's a very odd thing to consider, that all of us think more highly of ourselves than anyone else does.

These facts, after all, are not difficult to demonstrate. It is actually quite easy, if only you will make the effort, to prove to yourself how undeserving you are of the attention and the regard and the consideration we expect from God and others. Of course, we are nowadays only too used to being reminded of the failings of human beings. They are being trumpeted on the media 24/7. This politician is a philanderer; that one uses public money for his private pleasures; this one – like the governor of Missouri – abuses women and then threatens them with retribution if they tell on him. This athlete is abusive, that one is a cancer in the clubhouse, that other one abuses drugs or alcohol, and that one cheats with performance enhancing drugs. One of the most important and interesting facts about all of this reporting, however, is the lack of any real humility on the part of the reporter.

It goes without saying that the reporters regard themselves as far above such seaminess and moral weakness. But there are as many media types who have been outed for their flagrant violations of moral decency: whether sexual impropriety or journalistic malpractice. Everyone on a crusade against someone else's degeneracy seems oblivious to his or her own.

The universality of moral failure means that we Christians must likewise admit that our public figures have a knack for embarrassing themselves and so embarrassing us. Two of the most prominent evangelical leaders of the past generation have lost their positions over the past several weeks – Bill Hybels, the founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago and Paige Patterson, the president of one of the large Southern Baptist seminaries – Hybels for at least inappropriate relationships with women, Patterson for some patronizing and sexist remarks made over several years but which only recently came to national attention. And they weren't the only ones, alas. In the same two weeks two pastors of large churches in Fort Lauderdale and Memphis also resigned having been accused of sexual transgressions. And it isn't only sex. The evangelical world has had its leaders who pocketed the Lord's money, perpetrated frauds on unsuspecting parishioners, and were guilty of substance abuse. A generation ago, when speaking of Christian corruption, everyone used the example of medieval monks and nuns whose behavior made a mockery of their vows of chastity. Nowadays it is more likely to be an evangelical TV preacher who amasses real wealth from the saps who swallow his promises that if they send him money good things will happen to them or who is cavorting with his secretary behind his wife's back. If the Roman Catholics have their sexual abuse scandal, so do we. If the Vatican Bank is beset with charges of corruption, well we too have our frauds. Such moral failures, as many of them as there have been, have deeply damaged the moral reputation of Christ's church.

But it is too easy for us to say "Tsk, tsk," and imagine that if such people had been *real* Christians like us they would never have done such things. But the same is true of men and women we rightly regard as heroes of the faith. C.T. Studd, the 19th century Cambridge cricket star turned missionary, became later in his life a heroin addict, a fact that goes unreported in the laudatory biography written by his son-in-law, Norman Grubb. In our time when the statues of Confederate heroes are being torn down all over the south it is painful for us to remember that Jonathan Edwards owned slaves. Robert Dabney, the Southern Presbyterian theologian, wrote in his *Systematic Theology* a few pages on the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament that are better than I have found in any other Christian theologian. But devout Christian that he was he said things about African Americans that are nothing short of revolting and make you wish the poor man had never opened his mouth or uncapped his pen. Last Lord's Day evening I mentioned John Calvin's problem with temper and his harsh and critical spirit. I might have mentioned the same weakness as well in the life of Samuel Rutherford. Much as we admire that great Scot Christian and his love for Christ, he had a habit of losing friends because he took virtually any difference of opinion with him as tantamount to personal betrayal. Or consider Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch thinker and reformer who taught us so much about the implications of the sovereignty of God for every area of human life and endeavor. I may have told you before that one of the disappointing facts of Kuyper's immensely valuable life was that he, though one of his greatest interests was the reformation of the church, was irregular in his own church attendance. Many of his justly famous more popular books, such as *To Be Near unto God* and *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, are collections of the weekly meditations he wrote for the Christian newspaper, *The Herald*, a paper that he also edited. Many of these meditations were written on Sunday mornings when he should have been in the house of God!

Kuyper too lost friends left and right because of the harsh and arrogant way he responded to disagreement.

In fact, I have read enough through the years to know that if you don't know what faults your Christian heroes had it is only because you have limited yourself to the kind of biographies, popular among Christians, that leave the failings out. I remember thinking, after finishing Iain Murray's large two-volume biography of Martyn Lloyd-Jones that no one could be that good. The only negative remark I could remember being made by Murray about his hero was that he wasn't at his best delivering children's sermons. I've read enough since to know that more certainly could have been said to the great man's discredit. I continue to believe that he was a very great man; but like the rest of us he had his faults.

Now take note. I don't inform you about these Christians' feet of clay to detract from their accomplishments or even from their reputation for godliness. Mary Slessor may have been very hard to get along with, but she did great work in West Africa in the 19th century. She was a woman of prayer, of devotion to the lost, and to the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. I mention such painful facts only to make the point that *all of us* are, as all Christians always have been, deeply flawed. We all continue to be sinners and those who lived close enough to these great men and women to observe their lives could tell you in what obvious ways they continued to be sinners! I guarantee you that there were wise Christian people who loved and admired the Apostle Paul, but who could tell us things about the great man that would disappoint us.

Listen, I come from a family in which there have been a number of substantial Christian men: my grandfather, my own father, my uncle, who founded *Young Life*. They left behind a lifetime of important accomplishments. All my life I have had people praise those three men in my hearing and, of course, I love to hear that praise. I am justly proud of them and proud to be connected to them. I happened to run into a group of Young Lifers in the cafeteria at Qumran, near the Dead Sea, and mentioned to one of them that Jim Rayburn was my uncle. Suddenly everyone wanted his or her picture taken with me! I love it when I hear people say how much they admired them or how much they owed to them. But, I could tell you things about all three of those men that would not be so complimentary. I could take some of the shine off their reputations. I have no need to do that and no interest in doing that, but the fact that I could serves to remind us that we are all, even the very best of us, people with a great deal to be embarrassed about, which is to say, to be humble about!

And lest you are not yet impressed, take note, brothers and sisters, that so far, I have spoken only of those things in anyone's life, even any Christian's life *that are known to others*. What of that world within us – attitudes, thoughts, intentions, desires, daydreams, grudges, petty resentments, judgments made about others, the infernal preoccupation with ourselves – that no one else sees or knows but God.

Samuel Rutherford once wrote of himself: "I have seen my...vileness; if I were well known, there would none in this kingdom ask how I do. Many take my ten to be a hundred, but I am a deeper hypocrite, and shallower professor, than everyone believeth. God knoweth I feign not.... And, upon my part, despair might be almost excused, if everyone in this land saw my inner side." [Letter CLXVII, pp. 313-314 (Bonar ed.)] William Law, the author of the immortal *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, said of himself that he would rather be strangled and thrown into a swamp

than that anyone be allowed to see into his heart. [Cited in Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, iii, 156] I don't feel the weight of that truth as those holy men did, but I know only too well how true it is in my case. Can you deny that it is true in yours?

If those men, those Christians, should say such things about themselves and what they were like on the inside, what of us? For we have the very same vices but not nearly so much of their virtue. What would people say of our devotion, of our love of holiness, of our love of God and Christ; what would they say of our devotion to God's Word, of our faithfulness in prayer, of our hatred of sin, of our love of others, of our purity, our patience, our selflessness and humility, if they could look inside us and see what is there day in, day out? How many friends and admirers would we have if they saw the true person, the heart and mind and soul, and made their judgments about us knowing the full story? How little we are inside so much of the time; how carefully we hide our true selves from everyone else!

So, I say, brothers and sisters, God is not asking you to have a lower view of yourself than the facts require. He is asking nothing of you but simple honesty. He is asking you to relate to him and to others in keeping with the truth about yourselves. That is all! But that is a most important thing to know and to accept. *Very few human beings on the face of the earth ever have accepted or do today accept it!* For, you will notice that Peter does not tell you *how to be humble*, only that you should be. He doesn't give you several steps to take, certain strategies to employ with your soul. Godly people have developed such strategies over the ages as they have sought to obey the Word of God and to be humble before God and others; they figured out what was helpful to them in corralling the wild beast of their pride.

"Talk not about myself" Charles Simeon wrote to himself in his Journal.

"Desire to be unknown" said Thomas a Kempis. "Be ambitious to be unknown," was the advice of Archbishop Robert Leighton, the godly Scot of the time of the Covenanters.

"O teach me to love to be concealed," prayed Jeremy Taylor, the author of the spiritual classics, *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*.

"Lucifer himself would be a humble angel with his wings over his face if he had a past like yours and would often enough return to look at it." That was Alexander Whyte's recommendation for the cultivation of true humility. Make it a practice to examine your life if you want to cut your pride down to size!

And many of you remember St. Francis' method, whose problem was made worse by all the adulation that he received. So, he began to take a young monk with him wherever he went and whenever someone came up to Francis and praised him, the monk was to whisper the truth in the saint's ear, reminding Francis of how little the one praising him actually knew about Francis and his sins. Make it your practice when you hear someone being criticized to say, "Well he, well she is not as bad as I am and I have even less of an excuse!"

Many wise men and women have also recommended that you make it a practice to thank God for all of those ways in which you are lowered in your own estimation, everything that helps to bring you

down in your own eyes: every defect, every failure, and every missed opportunity to do something worthy! I read years ago that Isaac Watts, who lived his life as a bachelor, once proposed to a young woman, Elizabeth Singer, who was also an accomplished poet. She refused his proposal telling him that “though she loved the jewel she could not admire the [setting] which contained it,” a blunt reference to Watts’ physical appearance. It may not have been kind for her to say what she said, but the surviving portraits of Watts are demonstration enough of how understandable her judgment was. What if you are plain, as so many of us are? No one ever accused me of being handsome! That is not a bad thing if humility is, in fact, the most precious thing of all in a human life, the hardest thing to acquire and the most difficult thing to keep. Perhaps that is why so many are plain, because God loves a humble heart and knows how hard it is to be handsome or beautiful and humble at the same time.

All of this is very useful advice. Humility, being so much against the grain of our hearts, will not come easily and so without effort, determination, and clever devices on our part. But key to it all is motive and desire. And that comes first from the honest recognition of our genuine moral grubbiness. It comes second from the realization that it is humility that God loves, humility that he rewards, humility – true humility, for remember, he looks upon the heart – that opens the door to everything truly wonderful in life. “He opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” “Humble yourselves...under God’s mighty hand, and he will lift you up.” Or, as Alexander Moody Stuart put it: “There is not one humble heart in all the world that the High God is not dwelling in.” [*Memoir*, 247] And Rabbi Duncan also: “The man that understands the evil of his own heart, how vile it is, is the only useful, fruitful and solidly believing and obedient person...” [Cited in Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 194]

It should not be difficult for us to see why this is so. The one who sees himself down at the bottom, who faces the truth about his own sin and foolish pride, is down too far himself or herself to look down upon other human beings. He will always think kindly of those who treat him with kindness, knowing that he does not deserve it; and will never take note that others neglect him because he simply does not think in terms of what he deserves from others. “No,” you say, he will be depressed and morose and defeated in life, if he has such a view of himself and is constantly carrying around with him a sense of his own badness.

Ah, that *would* be the case. Except for this. It is in humility that one experiences again and again the gospel of Christ and the love and compassion and mercy of God. You see, what is Christian humility, honesty about oneself, except every day and day after day, and in many different ways, coming to oneself and saying to your heavenly Father “I am not worthy to be called your Son”? And what does your Father in heaven do when he hears you say that to him except once more say to his holy angels, “Bring forth the best robe and put it on him, and a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.” Remember? It is the son who refused to be humble, who thought himself better than his brother, who refused to go in, who never enjoyed the food, the dancing, the happiness of love, and the general merriment. Happiness is the lot of the humble; it is the proud who go through life grinding their teeth because no one treats them as they think they deserve to be treated.

No! Humility does not discourage or depress, it opens the door to the love of Christ and the full experience of that love. And that experience makes a man or a woman the most cheerful and useful

friend to others. We love them, however unlovely they may be from time to time, because when *we* were still more unlovely, God loved us and Christ gave himself for us.

Lewis put it this way. “Do not imagine that if you met a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*.... He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.” [*Mere Christianity*, 114]

No, he will not. He will be thinking about Christ’s amazing grace to him. And that grace will liberate him to live his life not forever thinking about himself; the sad, the unhappy lot of those who refuse to admit the truth about themselves and so never experience the love of God. They must love themselves, fiercely, defiantly, because no one else is going to, at least not if they know the truth. What a sad and scary way to live, fearing at any moment that people will find out at last who and what you actually are! And what a grubby way to live, having to act all the time as if you were someone else than you really are. To love yourself in that way, is simply to live a lie. On the other hand, humble yourself to accept that you need from Christ a love you do not and cannot ever deserve, and not only will you experience that life-changing love from God, but will be free so to love others. That love will not only make you so much better than now you are, but will bring you friends who love you for all the right reasons. That is the perfection and the genius and the goodness of Jesus Christ and his gospel. It makes you face the hardest of all facts so that the truth can set you free!