



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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HUMILITY

Humility is one of those Christian virtues which provokes in us a feeling of ambivalence. On the one hand, we know that it is to be desired in principle. Jesus was profoundly humble after all, and instructed his disciples time and again in the importance of humility. We also respect great people who are unassuming about their accomplishments. (Of course we are less likely to respect those who are humble but are basically failures -- which suggests that our respect for humility is more for their accomplishments than for their humility itself. In everyday folk, we just don't notice humility.)

Even as we accept humility as a Christian virtue, we have an unspoken doubt as to whether humility is really a good thing -- at least whether it is good for us before we have accomplished everything in our lives that we set out to do. Because on a conscious level we accept that humility is a virtue, these doubts generally operate below the surface. We wonder whether Christian humility is compatible with worldly success -- in business, friendships, society, even in church. In business, for example: how are we to get ahead and accomplish things, if we are not to put ourselves forward and fight for what we believe in? There is the competition of the marketplace: must Christians remain on the sidelines?

Our society is one which rewards initiative and admires the self-made man. Since we live here we are bound to share those values, at least to some extent. So we wonder if society would work if everyone were humble. And for ourselves, we wonder if we have to give up success in order to be humble. That somehow doesn't seem quite right, for Christianity is supposed to help us to thrive in this world.

There is a second, more serious doubt about humility. We suspect that humility involves thinking the worst about ourselves, and we resist it. We know that we do bad things from time to time, and sometimes things that we are really ashamed of. Perhaps humility is to dwell on such things and never to think of

the good we have done or our real Christian triumphs. If this is true, then how will we have any self-esteem left when we are humble? What will there be left in us that is worthy of respect -- whether our own or others'? If being humble is the opposite of being assertive, we will end up being a doormat for other people, accepting everything that comes our way, without trying to shape the way things are in our world. And then -- are we not apt to despise ourselves, since we look down on those who are too weak to have any effect on the world but are always overcome by it?

The most common way we deal with our doubts about humility is to compartmentalize: we put the Christian part of life in one compartment and worldly relations in another. By dividing them, we use one set of values at work during the week, and another at church on Sunday. We pretend that there is no conflict between the two. But we are left with the uneasiness that the two compartments might not really be compatible after all.

Much of this uneasiness is due to a misunderstanding of humility. For humility consists not of thinking the worst of one's self, but in not thinking of self at all. Self-forgetfulness is another name for humility. Of course, we cannot simply forget self, without putting something else in its place. Like nature, our heart abhors a vacuum. The only viable alternative for our attention is God.

In order to attend upon God, we need to put self aside. So much of the time we simply cannot get through to God because we put so much of ourselves in the way. Eve got into trouble when she thought about how much she wanted the forbidden fruit, and thus forced out of her mind the thoughts of God. Our pride inevitably centers us on our selves, on our desires and goals and needs. And then there just isn't much room left for God. We may still let Him in, but He is stuck with whatever room is left around the edges.

There is a second reason that we have trouble with humility: we are proud. The "old man" does not want to let go. This part of us wants to retain control of our life and live it in accordance with our desires and judgments. Humility would require that we renounce control of our lives, and instead obey God. Against this the "old man" rebels. Through subtlety he arouses all sorts of opposition to humility: the doubts of success and self-esteem and so on. It is simply his self-defense. For he cannot abide humility. There is only room for one Lord in our lives: self or God. It cannot be both. Self understandably fights tooth and nail. Since humility is the most threatening virtue to our selfishness, it is not surprising that there is such difficulty in our attaining it.

There are two principal means by which we learn humility. The first includes all those conscious decisions which we make to quell our pride. When, remembering Jesus' parable of the seats at the feast, we demur rather than claim what we think is our rightful place, we take a step in the right direction. Or we may fight against our ambitious de-

sires, recognizing them to be based in pride. Or we may try to control our vanity, and dress a little more simply, and content ourselves with the clothes we have rather than overspending on the latest fashions.

All such conscious works towards humility are vital: we must fight temptations whenever they come. We need to learn to recognize the temptations of pride, and to reject them, whether in deed or desire. But our efforts to attain humility will never quite attain humility. For of their very character they center us on self: in particular, on our own efforts to be humble. And thus even as we try to be God-centered rather than self-centered, it is **we** that are doing it. Catch-22. (Make no mistake: even if our efforts cannot by themselves attain their goal, they are nevertheless essential. We must work away at them.)

The second means is by far the more difficult. These are the occasions of humiliation which come our way from other people or in the circumstances of life. They may come through other people, pointing out our faults in one way or another. This is particularly humiliating when the person is one we do not particularly get on with. If it comes from a friend it is easier to take. But God can speak to us through an "enemy" (or at least someone we don't much like), just as He could use Caiaphas as a prophet of the significance of Jesus' death. It rankles, to be sure, but we need to listen to all criticism, and be ready to act on that which seems well founded, even if the source is one we despise.

Occasions also come in external circumstances. These come unbidden, and usually appear at a time when we are not thinking about pride. It is like coming to the great feast in Jesus' parable and finding all the good seats already taken. We resent it without even noticing that it is our pride at work. For example, we get irritated when our work at coffee hour or Sunday school is not sufficiently recognized and admired. Though we would not want to admit it, it offends our pride.

Humiliation comes our way in various forms. We may lose a new job or promotion to someone manifestly (to us at least) less able to do the job. We may back the car into a post. It may be a stupid mistake at bridge which turns out to cost the game. Or we may find that we have made a fool of ourself in some relationship, perhaps because we did not know something about the other person's past.

In all these cases, we tend to get upset about it, and strive to find some way to put things right. We go over and over the episode in our minds, trying to justify our behavior or excuse our fault. "It could happen to anyone." "I didn't mean to do anything." "If only someone had told me that he had just lost his job." "Why couldn't they see that I was better for the job?" The thoughts just keep coming around, and we can't seem to get out from under them.

The reason that the memory of such events has such a hold upon us is pride. We cannot really believe that we are capable of what we have done. We think ourselves competent (at least in job and driving and

bridge), and it offends our self-respect to have made such a mistake. So we dwell upon it. We try to reconcile the error with our competence -- but it doesn't really work. If we were as competent as we would like to think we simply would not have committed such an error.

So the only effective way to break the impasse is to amend the self-image. We could (and sometimes do) go overboard, of course, and think ourselves utterly worthless, getting into a great funk. Pride can often lead to depression in exactly this way. But far more fruitful is to admit that we are capable of error (or worse), that this is the way we are. A Christian can admit this because none of his sins can overcome the grace of redemption. In short, our sins cannot keep us from God. Christ died once for all. In a real sense, our sins **don't** matter. It is our pride that insists that they do, since in our pride we think that we determine our salvation rather than receiving it as a gift.

Thus the humiliations are important as rather striking ways of bringing us into a more perfect relationship with God. They force us to acknowledge that we are not Christians because we are good enough for God to adopt us, but because He is merciful enough to pardon our sins and weaknesses. In making it impossible to live with our self-image of goodness, we learn to trust His mercy instead. We shift the focus of our life, and especially of our identity, from self to God. We learn to accept our fallibility by accepting that we are made ever so much more worthy by the love of God. We begin to understand ourselves not so much in terms of our own accomplishments as in terms of His having made us lovable, adopted, children of God.

Humility is not therefore just one more Christian virtue to be added to others as we mature in the faith. It is fundamental. Humility is the means by which we receive what God has to give us. We must admit that we need it, and open our hands, else we cannot accept the gift. And unless we accept His grace, we are bound to fail pretty miserably when it comes to temptation. Peter himself warns us of this (see I Peter 5:5-9) when he follows his admonition to "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God" with the warning to be vigilant: "Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." We fall prey to our foe unless we are humble enough to allow God to preserve us in time of temptation. This counsel comes from the same Peter who fell into temptation walking on the water and in the courtyard of the High Priest. His warning carries the weight of unhappy experience!

In short, if we wish to get on in the Christian life, humility is essential. We should not only cultivate humility so far as we can, but we should be ready to accept (if not to welcome) those occasions of humiliation which God allows to come upon us. They will not be pleasant (discipline never is), but they will yield great fruit.