

Theological Background

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Humility has a central place in Christ's teaching. It is contrasted with pride, where people ascribe to themselves the honour and glory which is God's alone. Ultimately, pride seeks to compete with God, whereas humility acknowledges that God is God and that we should live in trusting dependence upon God.

The story of the Fall and the Tower of Babel are both about the potential of humanity to overreach itself, to want to be like God. Thousands of years of human history demonstrate the persistence and pernicious effects of this tendency.

Jesus taught his followers that if they wished to enter the Kingdom of Heaven they must be like children. This is no sentimental picture of children, who are quite capable of arrogance and the desire to see the whole world revolve round them. Jesus is challenging people to become like those who have no legal or social standing, to become like servants. Throughout his teaching, Jesus uses a series of images and examples to encourage his disciples to 'take the lower place', or 'to wash each other's feet.'

The words 'humility' and 'humanity' are directly linked, both being derived from 'humus' - the earth. God made us from the earth and in being humble we 'earth' our view of ourselves in reality. When compared to God we are nothing but that nothing is infinitely valuable to God who shared human nature.

The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation - the Son of God taking human flesh - is presented by Paul as the supreme act of humility in which Christ 'emptied himself' and took the form of a slave (Philippians 2:5-11).

The Christian message insists that it is through identifying with Christ's humble service and sacrifice that we rediscover that other truth about ourselves - that we are sons and daughters of God and made in God's image.

The Bible makes it clear that God is on the side of the humble and against the proud. As Mary sings in the Magnificat: He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble (Luke 1:52).

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, Jesus criticises those who are 'confident in their own righteousness' (Luke 18:9-14). He contrasts the self-congratulatory prayer of the one with the penitent humility of the other and concludes with the words: 'Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'

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Christians are called to a humility that challenges the values of our surrounding culture. Humility does not exclude a rightful satisfaction in the successful use of our talents or in a job well done, but it will always recognise that our gifts are from God and that, in relation to God, all human achievement is relatively small and short-lived.

Biblical References

Numbers 12:3

Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.

Proverbs 11:2

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

Isaiah 66:2

'This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.'

John 13:3-5

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Ephesians 4:2

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Philippians 2:3

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

James 4:10

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.