

LENT LECTIONARY

DIVINE HUMILITY IN CHRIST

(Philippians 2:1-8)

Jerry Truex; March 28, 2010

A. Humility

According to positive psychologists, “humility involves a non-defensive willingness to see the self accurately, including both strengths and limitations.”¹

Here are seven characteristics about humble individuals:²

1. They appreciate the truth about themselves.
2. They are more flexible, adaptable, and open.
3. They have fewer needs to impress and dominate others.
4. They have greater self-regulation and higher emotional well-being.
5. They are more empathetic and have healthier relationships, because they focus less on themselves.
6. They have relatively low focus on themselves and have the ability to “forget the themselves”
7. They have the ability to acknowledge mistakes and limitations (often with reference to a “higher power”)

There is also a clear link between humility and religious faith.³ “Religiousness ... fosters humility by encouraging self-transcendence.”⁴

We can see that people who don’t cultivate humility are likely to create problems for themselves, and if they are persons of power, they can create havoc on a grand scale.

B. Arrogance

For thousands of years, humility was a virtue, and pride was a vice. Things have changed. Things have reversed.

For many people in today’s world:

- Pride is in; humility is out
- Pride is a virtue; humility is a vice (or liability)

Much of our society values pride, but it goes a step further. Much of our society promotes excessive, self-centered pride—the arrogant flaunting of wealth and power, the trash talking, in your face self-celebration of athletes, pop-stars, rappers, and rich and famous celebrities—not to mention kings and generals.

¹ Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths*, 463.

² Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths*, 469-70.

³ Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths*, 464.

⁴ Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths*, 473.

In a survival-of-the-fittest, dog-eat-dog world, many people in our society view arrogant-pride and violent self-interest (a.k.a., national security) as virtuous.

Humility is weak and passive, self-abasing, and even invites aggression by the predators of the world. In a survival-of-the-fittest, right-is-might world, humility doesn't have survival value. Humility is dangerous.

What has happened to humility? Where can humility be found?

According to the Apostle Paul, humility comes to us in the Divine Presence. The most powerful, creative Reality in the Universe, namely God, comes in humility.

In Phil 2:1-8, Paul addresses the problem of disunity in the church. Disunity is created by selfishness and arrogance. This is a danger for every church and every relationship. Paul argues that the cure for disunity is humility.

B. Selfish Ambition versus Humility (Phil 2:1-4)

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but [also] to the interests of others. (NRSV)

1. The causes of disunity (v. 3)

In verses 3 and 4, Paul gives three causes for disunity.

a. Selfish ambition

First, Paul identifies “selfish ambition” as a threat to church unity. The word for “selfish ambition” (ἐριθείαν) refers to “greedy attempt to gain the upper hand through underhanded tactics.”⁵ People with selfish ambition work, not to advance the work, but themselves.⁶

b. Conceit

Second, Paul identifies “conceit” as a threat to church unity. The term “conceit” (κενοδοξίαν) literally means “empty glory.”⁷

“None are so empty as those who are full of themselves.” ~ Benjamin Whichcote.⁸

⁵ Frank Thielman, *Philippinas*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 97.

⁶ Barclay, *Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Revised Edition, Louisville: Westminster, 1975) 31.

⁷ Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 180.

⁸ Benjamin Whichcote (1609–1683) was a British Puritan, Provost of King's College, Cambridge, and leader of the Cambridge Platonists.

Empty glory focuses on acquiring “personal prestige.”⁹ For many, prestige is more important than wealth. It’s “name recognition” and celebrity status and with that “power”.

c. Self-interest

Third, Paul identifies “self-interest” (τὰ ἑαυτῶν) as a threat to unity. If a person is always concerned with his or her own interests, then that person is bound to collide with others.

For the person consumed with self-interest, life is about competition and winning. Life is a game of monopoly and the objective is to get as much for one self as possible. All others are viewed as opponents, who must be pushed out of the way.

2. The cure for disunity (vv. 1-2, 4)

a. Indicative: You are “in Christ” (v. 1)

Notice how Paul says, “If there is any encouragement ...”

2:1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,

The “if-clauses” should be understood as “since”.¹⁰ “Since there is” and Paul lists five spiritual resources.

According to verse 1, the five resources are available to those who are “in Christ,” “in the Spirit,” and nurtured by Love. Looking at verse 1, what are the five resources?

- (1) Encouragement (support, approval)
- (2) Consolation (comfort, relief, assistance)
- (3) Sharing (distribution of goods)
- (4) Compassion (awareness of another’s suffering)
- (5) Sympathy (sharing another’s feelings)

This is a representative sample. Paul is saying that since the Philippians are in Christ, in the Spirit, and nurtured by love ... they have certain spiritual resources. Period. That is the indicative. The spiritual facts.

b. Imperative: Have the same mind, love, and soul” (v. 2)

Paul then moves to the imperative.

⁹ So Barclay,32.

¹⁰ 1st class conditional assumes the protasis to be true.

2:2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind (*phroneō*; φρονέω), having the same love (*agapē*; ἀγάπη), being in full accord (*sumpsychos*; σύμψυχος) and of one mind (*phroneō*; φρονέω). (NRSV)

Paul is calling for unity of mind, love, and life/soul.

This is typical Pauline ethics. Paul gives the indicative, then the imperative. You are “something” (the indicative); therefore act like it (the imperative).

You are in Christ (the indicative); therefore act like you are in Christ (the imperative) ... show the world you are of one mind, one love, one soul.

c. Transforming Initiatives (vv. 3b-4)

In verse 4, Paul offers a *transforming initiative*. He offers a concrete way to realize the oneness of Christ in this world.

2:3b ... in humility regard others as better than yourselves

2:4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but [also] to the interests of others (NRSV)

Notice that Paul offers two *concrete ways* for us *to participate* in the grace of God. We are “in Christ”. That is God’s doing, God’s grace.

But now, Paul shows us how *we can participate in God’s grace*. Paul gives two imperatives, two transforming initiatives:

One: Regard others better than yourselves (v. 3b)

Two: Look to the interests of others (v. 4)

This is a technique for de-centering our (false) self; a method Paul probably used himself. By transcending our (false) self, we can

- listen to others more attentively,
- attune to their needs and issues, and
- affirm them as valued human beings.

This has relationship building at the core. Paul is offering a simple strategy for learning humility, which builds trust, empathy, and unity within a community.

Notice Paul does not say others are better, but rather “regard” or “consider” (*hēgeōma*; ἡγέομαι) others that way. We know he is not saying that because of what he writes in verse 4.

2:4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but [also] to the interests of others (NRSV)

The NRSV leaves the *kai* (and) out of the translation! It’s a textual variant.

C. Christ: Example of Humility (Phil 2:5-11)

Next, Paul gives Christ as the supreme example of humility.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the *morphē* ["form" or "image"] of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be *harpagmos* ["held" or "grasped"], ⁷ but *kenōō* ["emptied" or "humbled"] himself, taking the *schēma* ["form"] of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross. (JT)

1. In the *morphē* ["form" or "image"] of God ... taking the *schēma* ["form"] of a slave

a. *morphē* and *schēma*

Notice there are two words for "form" – *morphē* and *schēma* – but they don't mean the same thing.

The term *morphē* refers to the *essential form* that cannot be altered, whereas *schēma* refers to an *outward form* that changes over time.

The *morphē* of a person is humanity, which never changes; but the *schēma* is continually changing. I'm a human being. That's my *morphē*. It can't change. But my *schēma* has changed dramatically over the last fifty years.

b. *morphē*

There is some debate about what is meant by the *morphē* of God.

First, *morphē* could mean "form" or "essential being." This is the traditional view. Paul is saying "Christ is the *form* of God." That is, Christ is in essence, God. Later, the *schēma* of Christ changed and took on the appearance of a slave or servant.

Second, *morphē* could refer to "image". This is alternative view. Paul is saying "Christ is the *image* of God." In this way, Paul is saying that Jesus, like Adam, is "the image of God." Jesus is essentially Human. This is Adam Christology. Jesus replaces Adam as the representative human (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:45-47). In fact, Paul calls Jesus the Second Man/Adam in 1 Cor 15:47.

2. Did not regard equality with God as something to be *harpagmos* ["held" or "grasped"]

The word *har-pag-mos* can mean one of two things:

First, *har-pag-mos* could mean “held” as in “holding onto something.” This is the traditional view. In this view, Christ did not “hold on” his equality with God, but he let go. [Show by holding onto an imaginary object and letting go.]

Second, *har-pag-mos* could be “grasp” as in “reaching up and grabbing something.” This is the alternative view. In this view, Christ did not try to “grasp” or “reach up and rob” equality from God as Adam and Eve tried in the garden [Show by reaching up to grasp an imaginary object].

In the traditional view, Christ is God and did not “hold on to” or “clutch” being God. Christ did not “hold on” to being God, but “let go” to become human.

In the alternative view, Christ is like Adam, the image of God. But unlike Adam, Christ did not “grasp” or try to “rob” God of being God, which was Adam and Eve’s sin. In this case, Christ, the Second Adam, unlike the first, didn’t sin by trying to be like God. Christ was a faithful human being.

3. But *kenoō* [“emptied” or “humbled”] himself, taking the *schēma* [“form”] of a slave, being born in human likeness

In the traditional view, the Greek word, *kenoō*, literally refers to emptying something, like pouring water out of a container until there is nothing left. In this case, we have a picture of Christ pouring out his divinity to become a human being, a servant of God.

In the alternative view, the literal meaning of *kenoō* is taken metaphorically. The metaphorical meaning is “to be humble.” In this case, Christ, the human being, humbled himself and did not count himself as having the status of God. Christ was the Second Adam and, unlike the First Adam, didn’t count himself equal with God.

4. Summarize:

Traditional view:

Christ as God → emptied himself of divinity → became human

Alternative view:

Christ as 2nd Adam → didn’t seek to be God → revealed what it really mean to be human

In the traditional view, Christ is God, the form of God, but he “emptied himself” to become human. It was an act of humility on God’s part.

In the alternative view, Christ is the Second Adam, the image of God, and he “didn’t try to become like God.” Christ humbly accepted his role as “the image of God” and showed what it means to be an obedient human being.

In either reading, Christ is a model for humility.

D. Conclusion

Today, I have argued that humility is one of the most important character qualities we can develop and have. Humility enables us to be open, to receive accurate feedback, to learn from our mistakes, to form more stable relationships, to forget ourselves and focus on people and tasks bigger than ourselves.

But, in our world, humility has been replaced by self-celebrative arrogance as the supreme virtue for a hostile, dog-eat-dog world of “me first.”

Christians know better. The life of Christ shows that humility is the supreme virtue. Christ did not seek the status or prestige of God. He did not fail as did Adam and Eve. Rather, Christ heroically and wholeheartedly embraced the role of a faithful and obedient human being, a servant of God.