

## Lesson 23

# Be Humble

Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth, Matthew 5.5.

## Introduction

Humility was not a virtue in the Greco-Roman world. The word was often associated with failure and shame, referring to something that had been crushed or debased. In its place was the practice of seeking honor for one's accomplishments. Emperor Augustus (63BC – 14 AD) inscribed bronze tablets to be set up at his burial place, where a complete catalog of 35 areas of achievement and accomplishment was written by himself about himself. He lists military victories, public awards, gifts to the community provided at his own expense, and many other things so that all would know of the "honour that up to the present day has been decreed to no one besides myself" and that which had "been given me by the senate and the people of Rome on account of my courage, clemency, justice, and piety."<sup>72</sup> This type of self-congratulation was expected by world leaders and even ordinary citizens. It was very common for people to display their best accomplishments before others.

Even the Jews were not ashamed to draw attention to themselves. The great Jewish historian Josephus opens his autobiography with the type of self-congratulation that make most people today cringe:

I was myself brought up with my brother, whose name was Matthias, for he was my own brother, by both father and mother; and I made mighty proficiency in the improvements of my learning, and appeared to have both a great memory and understanding. (9) Moreover, when I was a child, and about fourteen years of age, I was commended by all for the love I had to learning; on which account the high priests and principal men of the city came then frequently to me together, in order to know my opinion about the accurate understanding of points of the law;<sup>73</sup>

So, when we read the opening sentences of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we need to see just how shocking his words were. Here he laid the foundational truth that a disciple never aggressively insists on his or her own rights but displays authentic humility. This is a complete reversal of the world's norm. It still is. While our culture may pay lip service to humility . . . pride and vain glory are still in high demand. We see it in Hollywood, sports, the media, among politicians, everywhere. Advertisements fill our minds with what we deserve and accentuate our self-importance. It is an ever-present problem that is rooted in pride.

How can we fight back?

## Defining Humility

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<sup>72</sup> Dickson, John. "How Christian Humility Upended the World." *ABC Religion and Ethics*. October 27, 2011. Online. Retrieved December 22, 2021 at <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/how-christian-humility-upended-the-world/10101062>

<sup>73</sup> Life 2.8. "The Life of Flavius Josephus." Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987, p. 1.

## What it is

To be “humble,” or “gentle,” is to be meek or considerate. One dictionary says it is “not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.”<sup>74</sup> Another person describes it in how we deal with other people; the humble are “those who do not throw their weight about.”<sup>75</sup> It is not to be confused with weakness. Meekness goes along with great strength and ability, but it is always inside a spirit of total dependence on God. It is the person who has brought himself under the control of God. In secular Greek, the word for *humble* was used to describe the taming of a wild animal.<sup>76</sup>

An unbroken colt is useless; medicine that is too strong will harm rather than cure; a wind out of control destroys. Emotion out of control also destroys, and has no place in God’s kingdom. Meekness uses its resources appropriately.<sup>77</sup>

True meekness is really a display of the strong . . . someone who could assert themselves but choose not to do so.<sup>78</sup> It is “power put under control.”<sup>79</sup>

## What it is not

It is not just the act of being nice.

It is not weakness. It is the opposite of violence and vengeance. In fact, it is the display of the greatest type of strength through the resisting of our human tendencies.

It is not a lack of conviction. It is the deep abiding trust that God is true to His promises and that His principles are right.

## Humility is Not Optional

**It is commanded.** *Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who carry out what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be concealed on the day of the Lord’s anger,* Zephaniah 2.3. In the New Testament we read: *Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save your souls,* James 1.21.

**You will not be saved without it.** *For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation,* Psalm 149.4. “Truly I tell you,” he said, “unless you turn and become like little children, you will

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<sup>74</sup> **πραῦς, πραεῖα, πραῦ.** Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

<sup>75</sup> France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007, p. 166.

<sup>76</sup> Hauck, Friedrich, and Seigfried Schulz. “Πραῦς, Πραῦτης.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–, Vol. 6, p. 644.

<sup>77</sup> MacArthur, p. 171.

<sup>78</sup> See Leon Morris who goes on to say that “self-assertion is never a Christian virtue; rather, it is Christian to be busy in lowly service and refuse to engage in the conduct that merely advances one’s personal aims.” Morris, Leon. *The Gospel according to Matthew*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992, p. 98.

<sup>79</sup> MacArthur, p. 171.

*never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,”* Matthew 18.2-4.

**You cannot share your faith effectively without it.** *In your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do this with gentleness and reverence, ...* 1 Peter 3.15-16a. Pride will hamper your effectiveness and damage your influence.

## Humility in Action

The best way to understand meekness is to see how it is described in Scripture. Let's consider three examples:

### Moses

Any lesson on meekness cannot go without mentioning Moses who is described as *a very humble man, more so than anyone on the face of the earth*, Numbers 12.3. We see his meekness and humble disposition exhibited in Exodus 4 when God asked him to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. We see it in his refusal to respond to criticism regarding his leadership, Numbers 12.1-2. We see it in his willingness to adapt and delegate some of his responsibilities after being overwhelmed by being the leader of Israel, Exodus 18.13-24.

### David

David was chosen as Saul's replacement as king because he was a man after God's own heart. In between the time Samuel anointed David and his actual installment on the throne, however, was very difficult. Saul made David his personal enemy thus subjecting David to becoming an outlaw and fugitive. David survived several attempts on his life by the hands of Saul. One of the greatest examples of David's meekness is seen in 1 Samuel 24.1-6 where, out of respect for the office Saul occupied, he refused to kill the king. He even regretted cutting off the fringe of Saul's robe. This is a great example of strength under control. David was content to allow God to be in control.

### Paul

In Philippians 3 Paul recounts his Jewish education. By human standards, he had every right to flaunt his background in Judaism. He was a Pharisee, and *blameless* regarding the Law. Yet, he says he counted it all to be loss in view of knowing Jesus Christ, Philippians 3.3-8. He walked away from his own acts of righteousness and boasted in the saving work of Jesus, 3.9-11.

### Jesus

There are several examples we could draw off Jesus' exhibiting meekness, the greatest example being His trial and crucifixion. There is another episode we should focus on in Matthew 12.15-21 where Jesus withdraws from confrontation. The first 14 verses of the chapter detail Jesus' and the disciples plucking grain to eat on the Sabbath. This begins a confrontation over whether healing was allowed on the

Sabbath, to which Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. After this happens, we are told, *the Pharisees went out and plotted against him, how they might kill him*, 12.14.

The next verse, I believe, exhibits the great meekness of Christ. Instead of continuing to make His point that He was the Lord of the Sabbath (12.8), he displays a gentle, non-confrontational attitude. Instead, He moves with great patience and serves humankind from the perspective of encouragement, rather than denunciation. Greater confrontations would come as His ministry progressed, but they would not be caused by Him.

Meekness does not look for confrontation ... it seeks peace and the building up of others. It takes the long-term goal in view.

## For Thought and Reflection

1. How was humility viewed by the world of Jesus' day? What about ours? Why is this such a difficult virtue to apply to our life?
2. How would you define a humble person? Are you humble?
3. Why is having humility of such importance? Explain.
4. What impresses you most about Moses' humility?
5. How did Paul exhibit a life of humility? What are some lessons we can learn from his example? How much work do you have to do?
6. What can we take away about humility from Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees in Matthew 12?