The Subtle Power of Humility
Part One: What is Humility?
By Remy Diederich
Cedarbrook Church
3.15.15

Text: Philippians 2:3-8

Humility is the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself. John Dickson, Humilitas

Outline:

Humility is:
1. not humiliation.
2. a choice
3. to serve others
4. beautiful
5. persuasive

Going Deeper: use the following questions for personal reflection and to discuss with your family, friends and small group.

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word, “humility?”
2. Were there any surprises about humility from the message?
3. Who are some people that come to mind when you think of the word, “humble.” Why is that?
4. Do you find humble people more persuasive than proud people? Why or why not?
5. Why is it that humility presupposes a strong sense of self-worth?
6. Read Philippians 2:3,4. What are the do’s and don’ts of humility?
7. Read Philippians 2:5. Christians seem to give themselves a pass on this command, like it’s optional or unattainable. What do you think this is? Have you taken this verse seriously? Why or why not?
8. Read Philippians 2:6-8. In verse 7, the NIV Bible says “made himself nothing.” More accurately it means, “he emptied himself.” What did he empty himself of? Consider the president of a company choosing to serve as a janitor for a period of time. He’s still president, but he “empties himself” or “suspends” his powers for a season.
9. How can Jesus’ example help you in living a life of humility?

Message:

I’ve never spoken on humility before. As I approached this topic I realized that there’s an inherent two-edge sword associated with talking about humility. If you are humble you probably don’t think you have the right to talk about humility. And if you aren’t humble,
no one thinks you have the right to speak about humility! No wonder there are so few sermons on humility!

But in spite of the awkwardness associated with speaking on humility, I want to talk about humility because I think it’s central to who God is, who Jesus was when he walked the earth, and who we are called to be.

You see, humility should be the essence of a Jesus follower, the aroma that we bring into a room and the scent we leave behind us. And so we are going to take the next few weeks, including Easter, to look at how we can develop humility.

**Do I really want to be humble?**

Now, some of us might raise our hand and say: *Excuse me, but I’m not so sure I want to be humble.* You’re afraid that if you acquire humility that it might be the fast track to stunting your career and blunting your influence: take the edge off your coolness. It’s like what Muhammad Ali said once:

“Humble people…don’t get very far.”

Isn’t the humble person the guy who gets pushed to the back of the line? The person that gets passed over because she doesn’t speak up for herself? No one wants that. So I can appreciate why you might not be excited to learn about humility.

I recently read this book, Humilitas, to help me better understand humility. The author is a Christian but he writes as a historian, not a theologian. I’ll be quoting from him quite a bit today. In contrast to the fears I just mentioned, the author said:

The most influential and inspiring people are often marked by humility. True greatness, in other words, frequently goes hand in hand with a virtue that, on the face of it, might be thought to curb achievement and mute influence. In fact, I believe it does the opposite. **John Dickson**

Now, humility won’t make you great. We all know humble people who are not great, and we know great people who are not humble. But the truly great leaders are also truly humble. In fact, in another book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins showed that the greatest leaders, what he called Level 5 leaders, were known to have two qualities that Level 4 leaders lacked: unrelenting determination and humility.

Collins reflected on the Level 5 leaders that he met during his research, he said:

We were surprised, shocked really, to discover the type of leadership required for turning a good company into a great one. Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities who make headlines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders seem to have come from Mars. Self-effacing, quiet, reserved even shy—these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates than Patton or Caesar. **Jim Collins**
So, rather than humility being a threat to your career and influence, humility can be the very thing that helps you advance in life as well as succeed at home, at work, in ministry, and with God.

If you want to pull out your notes I’ve got five points to help define humility for us. I’ll start with this definition from the book I just mentioned:

*Humility is the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself.* John Dickson, *Humilitas*

**Humility is Not Humiliation**

Using this definition, the first point I have is that humility is not humiliation. It’s not being a doormat. It’s not being pushed to the end of the line. Some people think of themselves as humble when in reality they just suffer from low self-worth. They allow themselves to be treated poorly, not because they are humble, but because they don’t think they are worth being treated well.

But Dickson said that the humble person forgoes their status. To forgo your status *presumes* that you believe you have status to begin with. You are aware of your inherent value as a child of God and so you don’t lower yourself because you think you are worthless. You lower yourself to achieve a higher purpose.

Jesus gave us a great example of what I’m talking about. Before the Last Supper, Jesus washed his disciples feet. Listen to what John said was the reason Jesus was able to humble himself:

> Jesus *knew* that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he had around him. John 13:3-5

There’s a direct cause and effect relationship here. Jesus’ ability to humble himself was directly connected to his self-awareness. He knew who he was. He was secure in his identity and his relationship to God. So Jesus was able to function as a servant without feeling threatened or demeaned. He didn’t feel the need to prove himself. He could risk being mistaken for a slave because he knew he was God’s Son.

So humility is not humiliation. It comes from a place of status.

**Humility is a Choice**

My second point here is that humility is a choice. The word “humility” comes from the word “humus” which literally means: earth or ground, implying being low to the ground. Metaphorically, the humble person is someone who is low to the ground.
But there are two ways you can find yourself low to the ground. One, you get pushed there. That’s humiliation. But the other way is by choice: you choose to lower yourself. That’s humility.

Paul told the Philippian church how Jesus made this choice:

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God, but emptied himself of his powers, taking the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Philippians 2:6-8

Many people have accused Jesus of being a loser for being crucified. In their minds, he suffered the ultimate humiliation. But Paul clarified this misunderstanding. Jesus didn’t have to do this. He wasn’t forced to become a slave and die. Jesus chose to die. It was voluntary. And because it was a choice, his death was an act of humility, not humiliation.

Jesus made this point when he was at a party. He noticed that the guests were all lined up, trying to get the best seats at the table. Luke tells it like this:

When Jesus noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.

But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Luke 14:7-11

If you are told to sit in a different seat, that’s humiliating. But if you choose to sit in a lesser seat, that’s humility. Jesus said: either way you end up in the lower seat. But one way is humiliating. The other way shows humility. Humility is a choice.

Humility is for Others

My third point also comes from Dickson’s definition: Humility is for others. Sometimes your status can get in the way of what God wants to do. You are so insecure that you feel the need to cling to your status, or your position, or your control. But then God can’t use you because doing what he wants requires relinquishing your status for a season.

For example: when Jesus came to earth he could have easily played the God card. That means he could have used his position and authority to get his way. “I’m God. You’re not. Do what I say.” Jesus could have done that. He could have set up his kingdom by forcing his will on us. But instead of demanding that we serve him to promote a selfish agenda, Jesus chose to serve us to help us make a connection with God. Jesus put it this way:
…the Son of Man did not come to be served. He came to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many people. Matthew 28:20

Jesus set the example for how to humble yourself to benefit others. Then Paul used Jesus’ example to encourage the Philippians to have the same attitude:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have the same attitude that was also in Christ. Philippians 2:3-5

So humility is not humiliation. It’s a choice to lower yourself for the sake of others. But there are two other attributes of humility that I want to tell you about.

**Humility is Beautiful.**

Next, humility is beautiful. Most of us would agree that humility in a person is attractive. It wears much better than pride. I like the story that John Dickson tells in his book.

He said three young men hopped on a bus in Detroit in the 1930s and tried to pick a fight with a man sitting in the back. They made fun of him. He didn’t respond. They ridiculed him. He said nothing. Eventually, the man stood up. He was bigger than they had estimated from his seated position—much bigger. He reached into his pocket, handed them his business card and walked off the bus. As the bus drove on the young men gathered around the card to read the words: Joe Louis. Boxer. They had just tried to pick a fight with the man who would become the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World. Louis chose to forgo his status on behalf of these three teenage boys, and I bet they were happy he did!

There’s something beautiful about that story…much more beautiful than hearing that Louis got mad and beat these kids up.

So humility is beautiful, but the interesting thing about humility is that it hasn’t always been seen as a good thing, a desirable thing.

Ancient cultures broke life into two simple categories: shame and honor. They would do all they could to gain honor and preserve it. And they would work equally hard to distance themselves from shame. To let go of your honor on behalf of someone else was the fool’s choice. It was shameful. Humiliating. Humility was for slaves, prisoners, and outcasts, not for respectable people. When authors wrote about moral virtues they never mentioned humility.

But historians noted a distinct shift in the first century. Suddenly writers started referring to humility in positive ways. Humility became a desirable quality to have, showing up on lists of virtues. Historians said that there was only one way to explain this shift. It came after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. A humility revelation took place with Jesus. John Dickson commented:
If the greatest man we have ever known chose to forgo his status for the good of others, reasoned the early Christians, greatness must consist in humble service. The shameful place is now a place of honour, the low point is the high point.

When Paul listed virtues for believers to aspire to, humility was often on the list. He told the Colossians:

…clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Colossians 3:12

Just a few decades later, a Roman church official named Clement (AD 96) sent a letter to Christians in Corinth saying:

You are all humble-minded, not boastful, yielding rather than domineering, happily giving rather than receiving. Clement (A.D. 96)

Dickson’s concluded this about the history of humility:

Western culture was imprinted by the cross. … Humility came to be valued in Western culture as a consequence of Christianity’s dismantling of the all-pervasive honour-shame paradigm of the ancient world. John Dickson

Jesus made humility beautiful.

**Humility is Persuasive**

My final point here is that humility is persuasive. We are more inclined to believe a humble person than an arrogant one. A few years back General Stanley McChrystal was asked what his approach would be to the insurgency in Afghanistan, and he said:

I have found in my experience that the best answers and approaches may be counter-intuitive. The opposite of what it seems you ought to do is what ought to be done. So, when I’m asked the question, What approach should we take in Afghanistan? I say, humility. General Stanley McChrystal

That’s the last thing I’d expect a general would say. What did he mean by that? He meant that if the US army came into Afghanistan like gang-busters, with all the power and all the answers, that was the worst thing they could do. It would offend the Afghani’s and turn them against the Americans. So McChrystal said the wise thing to do was to come in as servants. To come in humility. He understood that humility is persuasive.

Many of us think that the only way we can get our way is to power up and power over those who oppose us. Bosses do this. Parents do it. So do wives and husbands. But the most persuasive people are the people who persuade by suggesting, not demanding, who appeal to reason and goodness, and not resorting to using authority or intimidation to get their way.

One day Jesus spoke to his disciples about his teaching style. He said he didn’t teach like the other rabbis. He put it like this:
Take my yoke (teaching) upon you for I am humble and gentle and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:29,30

Rabbis used a top-down kind of teaching. “Here are the rules. Don’t question them. Just do them.” In another place Jesus described it like this:

They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Matthew 23:4

Jesus wasn’t like that. His teaching was respectful, not condescending. That’s why he said his burden was light. He persuaded people by his humility.

Humility serves others. It’s beautiful. And it’s persuasive.

Now, while I was talking today I bet everyone of us had someone in mind. We’ve all got someone in our life – someone that we deal with on a daily basis – that we wish was more humble. You are thinking of sending them this sermon.

Well, we have no control over that person. But we do have power over ourselves. What if this week we all looked for opportunities to humble ourselves – we set aside our rights – our power- our status- for the sake of others? Let’s make humility our focus between now and Easter and see if God doesn’t do something in our heart. In fact, let’s invite God’s spirit to do that work right now.

Prayer: Jesus, you gave us the ultimate example of humility. Open our eyes to see why humility is the virtue that you want us to model as well. Teach how to forgo our status to serve others. Holy Spirit, we can’t do this without your help. Lead us into the path of humility and empower us to lower ourselves on behalf of others. Amen.