

Humility Essential for Blessing

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‘Serving the Lord with all humility of mind’ (*Acts 20.19*).

THESE WORDS are from the parting speech of Paul to the Ephesian church elders, when they met with him at Miletus. They knew him well as he had been the founder of their church and its pastor for three years. How they loved him, especially for his total engagement with the work of Christ.

Paul described himself as one ‘serving the Lord’, the Greek being ‘slaving’ for the Lord, just as a bond-slave would serve his master. But we must consider the whole phrase – ‘serving the Lord with all humility of mind’. The apostle’s slaving and humility stand as an example and challenge to us all.

Paul was now an old man, according to the wear and tear of those days, but he never melted or stopped to waste time in excessive nostalgia. He never retired or settled back, but fulfilled his commission from the Lord to his last hour. It is, however, his humility which we wish to learn from here.

‘Humility of mind’ – what a term! We do not always see this on the evangelical scene today. We see ministers revelling in what they call authority and power and gifts, endlessly expressing their opinions and devising new methods of worship and outreach. There is an overflow of self-confidence and self-reliance. But the motto of Paul is ‘all humility of mind’.

We can understand Paul having physical humility because he was old, and could well have envied the energy and strength of younger people. He was also a sick man and tells us so. So we can well imagine that he would have humility when it came to his physical capabilities. But Paul had ‘all humility’, including humility of mind: intellectual humility.

From the reasoning deployed in his letters, we believe that Paul was a genius. It is true that his letters were inspired, reflecting divine genius, rather than that of the human penman. But inspired Scripture wonderfully accommodates itself to the natural style of the writer, and so we have the impression that Paul was himself a great intellectual. Yet he possessed tremendous intellectual humility.

If we read through Romans with an eye on the marginal references, we see the sentences are rich with Old Testament supporting texts, both direct and oblique quotations. Paul’s normal practice was to go by the book. He was not carried away by his great intellect but constantly proved his teaching from prior Scripture.

Dependence upon the Spirit

Paul’s deep humility is also seen in his total dependence upon the Holy Spirit of God for spiritual power, unlike some today who behave as though power is their own innate and natural gift, available to be exercised at will. The apostle, by contrast, acknowledges that he is held in contempt and criticised for his failure to exhibit a powerful presence. He never showed off, but looked to God for spiritual enabling. Evidently he was not one of those aggressive or over-loud preachers, whose sermons are a protracted harangue, and who march up and down their platforms bellowing. On the contrary, he was derided for the relative gentleness of his preaching.

Nor was Paul one of those people who demand blessings from God in prayer, claiming this and claiming that. Although we have great promises, encouraging us to pray, we should, like the apostle, come before God with reverence and humility, as needy supplicants. All the apostle’s recorded prayers are so humble. They are the prayers of one who asks and pleads, but never demands or claims.

The apostle's humility is specially seen in the light burdens that he placed on his supporters, for they were so modest. No one was ever so prepared to work with inadequate facilities and small provision as Paul was. He never stopped to protest, 'Look here, as an apostle I have a right to this or that.' Even when people let him down and failed to help him, he carried on as one in the service of the Lord and submitted to him. That is humility in holiness.

We may also note the small gatherings of people the apostle was ready to serve. He never said, 'Do you not know that I have founded many very large churches, and have great responsibilities, and will only speak if you can assemble a thousand people?' On the contrary, at Ephesus he went from house to house, driven by his concern for souls.

Consider also Paul's humility in the acceptance of trials, as recorded in *Acts 20.22-24*:—
'And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus.'

If only we could be as the apostle was in humility of mind and in the humility that accepts trials and needs, but pride so easily gets in the way. Pride is a terrible thing. It has so many forms; so many identities.

'Never-wrong' pride

There is inflexible or impenitent pride found in the person who cannot accept that he or she is wrong, and cannot sincerely apologise. People who once repented before the Lord for the saving of the soul, may, as Christians, become too self-important to regret and repent. They may lose any continuing sense of their inadequacy before the Lord.

The world promotes self-confidence as the vital quality for success in life, but we turn to Scripture and see that this is the very last thing we need. Rather we need a realistic sense of our inadequacies. Let us fear self-confidence, self-reliance and self-importance. There is much repenting to do when pride breaks into the house of the soul.

'Be-noticed' pride

Then there is a form of pride which looks for notice, for praise, for reputation, or for superiority and power and special office. Does this creep into us? It is a form of pride that does not speak its name as it enters, but comes silently. Vigilance and self-examination must be on duty to recognise and repudiate it.

Related to this is the pride that wants expensive and unique things, or things that are different from what most Christians have, because possessing these things is like having a chain of office round your neck which declares: 'I am special; I am better; I am superior.' It is a terrible fall to be drawn into self-advertising, covetous pride.

Unsubmissive pride

Then there is the form of pride which dislikes rules and hates to be governed. It must always have its own way, saying, 'My judgement is best and I will do what I want to do.' It can come to Christians. It may have been a person's way of life before conversion, and the devil will attempt to revive it, stirring up proud self-government, arrogant individualism, or distaste for any kind of humble compliance.

How is humility lost?

When we are saved we are given humility by the Lord. This is one of the sure evidences of salvation, when the ugly impediment of pride is replaced by precious, beautiful humility, a spirit of dependence upon God, a desire to learn, and a readiness to be corrected. What happens to that

humility? How is it lost?

Sometimes it is lost because we have abilities which go to our head. O friends, don't be foolish; don't dwell on your abilities. Don't think too much about them, or let them elevate you above others. Remember that the gifts of God are spread throughout the body and you only possess two or three of them, at most. Other believers have different gifts, and we need each other, and a multiplicity of people are needed for the service of each church. God is fair in these matters, and distributes gifts to all. Do not let the devil lie to you, and tell you that you are more important than others.

Retaining humility

Here is some advice about how to deal with gifts when they go to our head. First, give some time every day, or frequently, to consider your weaknesses and your mistakes. This always humbles us. Consider the other side of the coin. And then challenge yourself by reflecting not on your gifts, but on your usefulness. Think of what you have done with your gifts, and how much more you should have done with them, and should be doing even now. Think of the years in which you received far more than you ever gave in service to the Lord, and you will be humbled by indebtedness and even shame. This is how we keep ourselves in hand and hold on to our conversion humility. Remember that we are useless without God's blessing, and God hates pride. So what is the good of our gifts if the Lord finds us unacceptable?

Instrumentality needs humility

Why was the apostle Paul so blessed, no matter what difficulties he passed through? Because he aspired to – 'all humility of mind'. He jealously preserved humility. We have known of people in the ministry who were immensely gifted and able, but who were never much blessed, because they allowed humility to slip away.

Pride like Satan's

Sometimes, as though to teach us, God turns matters on their head and chooses a person with no apparent abilities, and uses that person mightily. This does not seem to be his normal way of working but sometimes he does this, perhaps to warn those who are more gifted not to be proud. And so he makes fools of the more gifted. In the annals of Christian service we have famous examples of greatly used people who possessed no obvious gift, and we think, 'How did they ever have such success in their work and ministry?' Was it God warning the gifted ones that he does not bless if giftedness puffs up?

Sometimes we can be proud because we lack an ability, and we become envious of others, refusing to acknowledge God's distribution of gifts, and campaigning to climb above those we envy. This is what happened to Satan. This is very profound, and I can only put it in a sentence or two – but Satan became so intensely jealous of God that he refused to believe God was distinctively God. It seems that Satan began to think that God was like him, a mighty angel with whom he could compete. And so Satan took a course of action which, with his great intelligence, he would never have taken if he had continued to realise that God was God. He began to fight against God and to thwart and destroy his work, in order to be higher than God. This is what Scripture tells us in *Isaiah 14.12-17*, the analysis of the root of Satan's horrific crime – the root of pride. Could this be the case with us, that we begin to despise people whom we secretly envy, and that we boost our pride, denigrating them in our mind? Our pride acts in bitterness and in competing self-elevation. Only repentance and the recovery of humility will lead us to the discovery of God's intended service for us.

More helps to humility

If you have been given success, do not become proud and praise yourself. Recognise instead how

much you owe to colleagues, fellow workers, praying believers, and most of all to God, who gives the increase. Fear pride, dear friends; it will devour your love, your mind and your years.

Some Christians may become very proud of what they know. The antidote to this is to reflect on how much you do not know. Some people are even proud of the length of time they have been saved, finding superiority in this. To cure this, think about what you have done with that time, and how you will account for it. This is very humbling, and leads to deep gratitude to God for grace, which disperses the odour of pride.

Satan can bring you to derive pride from holding office, or from possessions, and even from possessing a good physical build.

Let us come to the apostle's words in *Acts 20.19*, where he speaks of 'serving the Lord'. What a concept is encompassed here! The word 'serving' strictly means 'bond-slaving', for Paul is a bond-slave of Jesus Christ. This tells us more about humility, providing both signs of humility and steps toward it.

Humility in committedness

A bond-slave is committed to the service of his master. He looks out for his every need, is receptive to his every command, and goes wherever he is sent. Humility, therefore, as we have already noted, is ready to work by the Book of God. Humility keeps its eye on the Master, to obey and please him. Even preachers sometimes seem to have their eye on people rather than their Lord. They ask, 'What will attract the most people, and what will please their tastes? What will give me a good reputation or make me well-known?' The apostle looked only to Christ for instructions on methods or for approval. He never adjusted or compromised his teaching or approach to please carnal tastes.

Humility in self-review

A bond-slave of Christ constantly reviews his conduct through humble self-examination every day, asking himself, 'What have I done? Have I offended my Lord? What are my sins of omission? Could my work be better done?' Pride seldom reviews, except in the scantiest manner, but humility often does.

Humility in gratitude

A bond-slave of an emperor was always conscious of his privileges, and so are we in serving no less a Lord than the Saviour and Judge of the world. 'Why was it,' we ask, 'that the Lord worked in my unbelieving, sinful, proud heart to bring me to himself? I would never have sought or come to him of myself.' Humility remembers this often, together with the ongoing patience and mercy of the Lord. The Newton-Cowper Museum at Olney has the framed text that hung on John Newton's study wall bearing the words, 'Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.' He never forgot what God had brought him from, and this spurred him forward in dedication.

Humility in accountability

A bond-slave is accountable, and so Christian humility keeps in view the coming day when we will return our commission to the Lord who called us, to receive the undeserved eternal reward. When we find ourselves in harsh circumstances, tempted perhaps to anger, resentment or self-pity, we maintain our composure by saying in our heart, 'I am a bond-slave of the Lord, accountable to him for my reaction to everything, for my words and my manner, and I will not disappoint him or let him down.' This is humility.

Humility in self-denial

A bond-slave cannot have luxuries, and humility willingly forfeits them as dangerous. Every

unnecessary luxury is seen as a pride-promoting missile to the soul, and avoided. Humility is not unduly concerned about appearances. It is not averse to being smart, tidy, neat and clean, but humility does not strain to stand out as special, and to be noticed.

Humility does not mix comfortably with boasters. It does not find it enjoyable to be with those who brag and boast, and it knows how easily the bragging virus is caught.

Humility in a shared cause

Just as the lifelong bond-slave learned to have the interests of his master in mind all the time, so Christian humility has the cause of Christ in constant view. Occasionally we see this go wrong, even with ministers. One hears of a dispute in a church leading to the minister being hurt and offended, but his reaction is to do and say things which bring the cause into disrepute and harm the work. He is thinking of himself rather than the cause. Humility thinks of Christ and the honour of his work, not of its own vindication and comfort.

Humility in serving others

In fact, like the bond-slave of old, humility always thinks of others before itself. It is an outgoing, sympathetic virtue. Look again at the apostle's humility, and how he was able to say, 'Remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears' (*Acts 20.31*).

What were these tears? They were certainly not tears of self-concern, but tears for the lost, and for the safety of God's flock. They showed the apostle's great concern that false teaching might come in and hurt the people of God. They were tears of pastoral concern when believers quarrelled, longing that they might be reconciled and restored. Humility is an outgoing, sensitive, sympathetic virtue, and if we become supportive, outgoing people, we promote humility in ourselves. The humble person wants to know how other people are faring, and goes out of his way to help.

Humility in accepting trials

The dedicated bond-slave of old both triumphed and suffered with his master, and so does Christian humility. It readily absorbs trials and troubles for Christ. Paul had so many trials. We read of some of these in the Acts of the Apostles, but he suffered far more than the record narrates in detail. Just look at Acts 20.19, where he speaks of 'temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews'. We have some record of that, but when he puts it in the plural, we realise ambushes and traps were common and continuous for him. However, he never said to himself, 'I should not be subjected to this; I should not have to put up with this; I am an apostle; I am aging and sick; this is not fair.' Humility meant that he took everything that came upon him for the sake of the ministry of Jesus Christ, and out of love and gratitude to him.

Humility in diligence

Humility, as reflected in the dedicated bond-slave, is diligent, *Acts 20.20* providing the details: 'I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house.' The apostle aimed at thoroughness, preaching to promote conversions, sanctification, and to furnish minds with the doctrines of the faith. He preached also to draw believers into Christian service, and to bring about their separation from the world. He preached the glorious things of Christ in all their fulness, covering everything, because humility is diligent. It is pride that preaches only the themes that are most appreciated, and gain most applause.

Humility, like love, does not cling to its own interests, or even its own life. Paul was able to say, 'Neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy' (*Acts 20.24*). Humility is prepared to do the lowliest things: 'Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands

have ministered unto my necessities' (*Acts 20.34*).

Humility watches for other people, whereas pride looks at number one. Humility does not covet; pride does. Remember *Acts 20.33*: 'I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel.'

Humility is constantly dependent upon the Lord in prayer, and the humble Christian still commits every act of witness, every journey even, to the Lord, in prayers that ascend often throughout every day.

They imprisoned Paul, derided him, counted him as nothing, and called him a madman. He was often cold and hungry, sick and exhausted, arrested and flogged, but God mightily used him, because humility is a magnet to blessing.

Ravages of pride

Pride is horrible, always starting in the mind. It goes before your every fall. It loses you true friends, surrounding you with proud people like yourself.

Pride looks so absurd and ugly. You may not recognise it in the mirror, but it is obvious to most others. Somehow it stamps its signature on your stance, sometimes the very tilt of your head, the look in your eyes, and even the tone of your voice. People know you are proud, and strangely, even if they are proud themselves, many will despise you for it.

Pride clouds your judgement, robbing you of the perspective that makes good decisions. Pride rejects counsel and trusts only its own conclusions. Pride is like the king in the Book of Proverbs, who surrounded himself with inadequate officers, and appointed fools as secretary of state and chief members of his cabinet because he felt threatened having gifted people around him. The foolishness of pride!

Most people regard proud people as insincere. Accordingly, if pride gets into a preacher he becomes disabled as an instrument of God. Misguided believers may admire him, but the unconverted will never trust him, thinking that he is all about himself.

Prognosis of pride

Pride brews in the mind and in day-dreams. It soon infects all a person's thoughts and hopes, and if not fought early, can only be purged by a humbling fall or a sharp affliction. The Saviour said – 'For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted' (*Luke 14.11*). Surely this refers not only to final judgement, but to how the Lord, in mercy, deals even now to sanctify and bless his people.

Pride can be very lazy in witness and effort for the Lord, because the proud Christian overestimates the little he does. A minister of meagre accomplishment is probably deluded by pride that his small measure of effort is far greater than it really is.

In *Colossians 3.12* Paul declares: 'Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering.' We must put on the garment of humility because we belong to God and represent him. How dare we flaunt ourselves and our imagined capabilities when we are commanded to 'be clothed with humility'! (*1 Peter 5.5*)

A picture of Paul

We think of dear Paul, the suffering apostle, possessor of a heart burdened for lost souls, for the wellbeing of Christians, and most of all for the glory of his divine Master.

We think of dear Paul, never aloof, never high and mighty, never too important for individuals or for lowly tasks. We think of dear Paul, never too sick or too old to be at full stretch as a bond-slave of Christ.

If Paul were alive today, we cannot imagine him being happy with flattering introductions at meetings, or idolising biographies. If we saw him in informal conversation with others keen to quiz

him about himself, we would see him more interested in them, and in the things of the Lord. Perhaps only later would they appreciate how little they had gleaned from him, aside from his testimony of salvation and of Christ's goodness.

Let us do all we possibly can to root out personal pride, hating its every manifestation and rejecting every self-parading thought. If only it could be true of us, that we served the Lord 'with all humility of mind'. Let this be our burning desire, because this is the gateway to instrumentality in the service of Christ.