

GOSPEL-
POWERED
humility

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WILLIAM P. FARLEY



P U B L I S H I N G
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*Pride Is Utter Poverty of Soul Disguised as Riches,
Imaginary Light Where in Fact There Is Darkness.*
—**John Climacus** (570–649)

How foolish, how absurd, how ruinous, how blindly destructive of its own object, does pride appear! By attempting to soar, it only plunges itself in the mire; and, while endeavoring to erect for itself a throne, it undermines the ground on which it stands, and digs its own grave.

It plunged Satan from heaven into hell; it banished our first parents from paradise, and it will, in a similar manner, ruin all, who indulge it. It keeps us in ignorance of God, shuts us out from his favor, prevents us from resembling him, deprives us, in this world, of all the honor and happiness, which communion with him would confer; and in the next, unless previously hated, repented of, and renounced, will bar forever against us the door of heaven, and close upon us the gates of hell.

O, then, my friends beware, above all things, beware of pride. Beware, lest you indulge it imperceptibly; for it is, perhaps, of all sins, the most secret, subtle, and insinuating. That you may detect it, remember, that he only, who seeks after God in his appointed way, is humble; and that all who neglect thus to seek him, are most certainly proud in heart, and, consequently, an abomination unto the Lord.

—Edward Payson (1783–1827)

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Preface

WHAT DO AUGUSTINE, William Law, Jonathan Edwards, Andrew Murray, and C. S. Lewis all have in common? Two things: First, they concur that humility is the root of all virtue. It is the essential spiritual fruit, the one necessary for both conversion and sanctification. Second, they agree that despite its importance, it is the least emphasized virtue. “Generally speaking,” noted William Law (1686–1761), “it is the least understood, the least regarded, the least intended, the least desired and sought after, of all other virtues, amongst all sorts of Christians.”¹

Since Law wrote these words in the eighteenth century, little has changed. We are in the same quagmire today. The most important virtue is still the least valued. Dr. Stuart Scott, writing in 2002, notes, “Despite the fact that [pride] is so widespread, it is perplexing how little has been written on pride in recent years. To read very much on the subject of pride, one must read Puritan literature.”² In the secular world, humility is seen as weakness, a lack of confidence, a virtue that impedes advancement or productivity. Many in the church share these assumptions.

The truth is the opposite. Failure to prioritize humility impoverishes our efforts to evangelize, retards our growth in godliness, and impedes the effectiveness of our ministries. And it makes us ineffective in business.

If humility matters this much, then Christian ministry should aim to produce not just faith, but a faith that humbles sinners. That God has designed the gospel to do just this is often not understood. Why and how God designed the gospel to promote humility is the subject of this book.

PROBLEM AND SOLUTION

The absence of an emphasis on pride and humility is costly. Dr. Jim Edwards writes, “American Christianity is suffering theological collapse. The primary commitments of church members seem to be peace, the search for personal fulfillment, and the conviction that God judges no one.”³ David Wells adds, “For many people, the word ‘evangelical’ has become a synonym for what is trite, superficial, and moneygrubbing, a byword for what has gone wrong with Protestantism.”⁴ To prove this conclusion, Wells later notes, “In America 45 percent say they are born again but only 9 percent, and maybe only 7 percent, give any evidence of Christian seriousness by way of minimal biblical knowledge for making life’s decisions.”⁵

One reason for this is that many of our pulpits have lost their cutting edge. The clarion call to flee the wrath of God has almost disappeared. This message feels old-fashioned—language that doesn’t jibe with the modern world. Instead, we hear sermons on how to have a better marriage, how to manage our finances, and how to have better relationships. Yes, these subjects matter greatly—but they are secondary, not primary. They are not theology. They are the *fruits* of theology. They are not the gospel. They are *fruits* of the gospel. When we assume the gospel and pursue the fruits, the fruits eventually displace the gospel and all that remains is “moralism.” When this happens, grace degenerates into “being nice,” God’s love becomes superheated human affection, and his mercy is a tip of God’s hat to “decent people” who try hard.

The remedy for all of this is the doctrine of God, and God reveals himself most clearly in the most basic Christian truth, the gospel. My contention is that the church is most apt to fulfill its God-given purpose when we preach the gospel in such a way that it produces a faith that humbles sinner and saint alike.

This book is my attempt to fortify the gospel we preach. In it the reader will learn that one of the first signs of pride is the secret feeling that I am really humble, in fact more humble than most, whereas people growing in humility deeply feel the pain of their pride.

You will also learn why apathy toward God's Word is often a symptom of pride, and that the pursuit of humility is the cure.

The reader will learn that humility is a necessary precedent for both justification and sanctification. You may also be surprised to learn that Romans 1–3 contains seven words about the bad news for every word announcing the good news, and there is an important reason for this. You will also discover that justification by faith alone is a humbling doctrine and that God designed it that way for a specific purpose.

You will learn why God's wrath is an expression of his goodness, why you would not be able to trust him if he did not become intensely angry with sin and sinners.

You will find out how preachers from past generations wielded the bad news to amplify the beauty of God's infinite goodness, and obtained remarkable long-term results.

You will see why the humble are able to discern what God is doing, even while the proud are blind to the activity of God's Spirit.

WHY ANOTHER BOOK ON HUMILITY?

In the last century, several excellent books on humility have been published. Andrew Murray's classic, *Humility, the Beauty of Holiness*, published at the end of the nineteenth century, is

one example. More recent decades have added Wayne Mack's *Humility: The Forgotten Virtue*; Thomas Jones and Michael Fontenot's *The Proudful Soul's Guide to Humility*; and C. J. Mahaney's *Humility: True Greatness*. Each volume does an excellent job of describing why humility matters and how to acquire it. So why another book on humility?

Answer: This book takes the reader beyond the personal benefits of humility. It agrees with these authors and then builds on them. Humility is the crucial virtue. Without it, the Christian will not be fruitful. Humility is the fertilizer that nourishes our souls and makes us fruitful. Without it, we will lack zeal, be unable to mourn sin, and have little compassion and patience for others. In short, without the pursuit of humility, our souls will wither.

In addition, this book asserts that unless we preach the gospel with the intention of humbling sinners, there will be few real conversions, and among those who are converted the fruit will be withered.

There is a three-foot-high door in the front of our local Walmart. It looks like a door for the vertically challenged. Curious about its purpose, I inquired of one of the employees. "We return shopping carts through that door." As he answered, I realized that this mini-door symbolized God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is for those vertically challenged in a spiritual sense. You must stoop to enter. You must humble yourself. God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. Therefore, faith that does not provoke humility, causing it to sprout and grow, is unlikely to be a saving faith, no matter how many times the individual signs a card or responds to an altar call.

WHY THIS BOOK?

That is why I wrote this book. If humility is this essential, it makes sense that God has designed the gospel to produce

a faith that humbles the proud. This book contends that he has. Those who understand this principle wield the gospel purposely. First they let it humble themselves. Then they use it to produce a faith that humbles their hearers. They preach the gospel differently. They conduct Christian ministry differently.

There is an old saying from the seventies: “The job of the church is to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed.” Rephrased in biblical language, we could say: “Our job is to humble the proud (for the proud are always comfortable, complacent, unconcerned about their spiritual condition) and comfort the humble (for only the humble are ready for the comfort that the gospel brings).” Charles Simeon (1759–1836) understood this principle. Here is how he described the three aims of his ministry: “To humble the sinner, to exalt the Saviour, and to promote holiness.”⁶ Few contemporary Christians share these aims, and that is one significant reason for the predicament of modern evangelicalism. Simeon’s assumptions are those of a bygone era, and the spirit of our age blows hard against those who attempt to return there. Yet this is our need. God has designed the gospel to humble sinners, exalt Christ, and produce the holiness that is always the fruit of those who seek humility first.

The first two chapters argue that humility is the chief and necessary virtue, the virtue that precedes the others. They lay the groundwork for all that follows.

Chapters 3–7 constitute the main body of this book. They argue from church history and the first three chapters of Romans that the apostolic gospel seeks to produce a humbling faith. Presuming that fallen man’s default condition is pride, that pride is the backbone of original sin, and that it is the great barrier to the gospel, Paul began his “gospel presentation”⁷ with the bad news. He knew that pride was the great barrier to conversion, so he sought to humble sinners. More importantly, a careful analysis of Romans 1–3 indicates that

the vast majority of Paul's gospel presentation was bad news. It concerned the wrath of God, the inevitability of judgment, and the utter sinfulness of man. Only then did Paul introduce the good news—justification by faith alone—and he did so in order that no one might “boast” (Rom. 3:19, 27). By contrast, the time spent on the good news was short.

Chapters 8 and 9 apply the thesis to the work of ministry. Chapter 8 discusses the fundamental sin that keeps us from using Paul's methods: the fear of man. Chapter 9 ends the book with an exhortation to the Christian worker to model the humility that he or she seeks to produce in others.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This is a book for everyone doing Christian ministry, not just those paid by the church. It is for those who want to share the gospel with unbelievers more effectively. It is for those who want to counsel their friends more productively. It is also for professional Christian counselors. Most importantly, it is for those who regularly preach the Word of God. Preaching is the rudder that steers the local church. He who preaches to produce humility will increasingly steer his church into the deep waters of God's holiness. His evangelistic efforts will be fruitful. That is because the power of God pursues the ministry that seeks to humble others.

We have already noted that humility is not the goal of most Christian workers. A random survey of the sermons of some of our largest churches will quickly convince one that the subjects most apt to provoke humility are conspicuously absent. Sermons on the sinfulness of sin, the terrors of hell, the reality of final judgment, the fear of God, the substitutionary penal atonement, and the wrath of God are exceedingly rare. Instead of disturbing the comfortable, we seek to comfort them further. Instead of humbling sin-

PREFACE

ners, we seek to further inflate their self-esteem. God will be glorified, grace will be truly amazing, and Christians will experience true spiritual happiness and contentment to the degree that our egos have been joyfully deflated.

My fervent hope is that this book will do something to remedy this problem.

Acknowledgments

I WANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE and thank some old, dead, white men whose thoughts have provided the creative spark for this book.

My relationship with them began in the summer of 1987. At the time I was wrestling with the attributes of God. How can God be wrathful and loving at the same time? How is it possible for God to be both infinitely just and infinitely merciful? The Bible presented me with a God who was all of these and more, but I was not prepared to answer these questions by throwing part of my Bible out.

About this time I came across *A Harmony of the Divine Attributes* by William Bates, D.D. (1625–99), a Puritan. The thesis of his book was that the cross was the place where the love of God and wrath of God shook hands; the justice of God and the mercy of God lay down together; and the righteousness of God found fulfillment in the grace of God. It was a personal watershed. Since that time the cross of Christ has been at the center of my thinking.

In God's providence Bates was shortly followed by my first reading of Jonathan Edwards' (1703–58) *Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World*. This was another personal turning point. For the first time I beheld the centrality, the magnificence, and the awful immensity of God. My man-centered worldview transitioned to a God-centered perspective that has only grown over the years. The greatness and glory of the God

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

understood by Edwards captured my imagination. A process of personal humbling began for which I am deeply grateful. For five years I devoured the works of Edwards in my spare time.

For these men and others like them (Bunyan, Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones) I am deeply grateful to God. In his kindness he has provided them to humble me and the arrogance of modern life.

To their memory I dedicate this book.

In addition, I want to thank David Farley and David Nelson for painstakingly reading this manuscript and providing critique. However, for all the mistakes and eccentricities in this work I take full responsibility.

PART ONE

THE PROBLEM

Humility “is so essential to the right state of our souls, that there is no pretending to a reasonable or pious life without it. We may as well think to see without eyes, or live without breath, as to live in the spirit of religion without the spirit of humility. And although it is thus the soul and essence of all religious duties, yet is it, generally speaking, the least understood, the least regarded, the least intended, the least desired and sought after, of all other virtues, amongst all sorts of Christians.”

—William Law (1686–1761), *A Devout Call*¹

1

“There It Is”

“Alas, how much pride have the best of us in our hearts! It is the worst part of the body of sin and death, the first sin that ever entered into the universe, and the last that is rooted out. It is God’s most stubborn enemy!”

—Jonathan Edwards¹ (1703–58)

A FEW YEARS AGO, I decided to conduct a Bible study for a group of singles. I gave them a list of topics to rate in order of their greatest need. The results were a pleasant surprise. Rejecting practical teaching such as how to forgive, 80 percent wanted greater intimacy with Christ. Their response was consistent with my experience over the years.

Although the practice of spiritual disciplines and servanthood should lead us into a deeper experience of our union with Christ, these disciplines will not, by themselves, do so. Knowledge of the Bible, prayer, worship, and witnessing should all deepen our relationship with God. We engage in these practices to please God and love our fellow man, but pleasing God and loving people won’t happen unless we

add one crucial virtue to the mix. Of the importance of this virtue I was ignorant for many years.

EYES OPENED

God opened my eyes in a dramatic way. In October 1993, during my Bible study, Isaiah 66:2 graphically caught my attention: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (NIV). I wanted a deeper relationship with God, and I felt convinced that this verse had something to do with it, but I did not understand why. So I prayed, “Lord, help me understand what this verse has to do with a deeper relationship with you.”

Five days later my wife and I were leaving Cannon Beach, Oregon, for a drive down the Oregon coast. While I was meditating on the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, my attention was caught by a second verse: “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12 NIV). Instinctively, I sensed that God *saw* spiritual darkness in me to which I was blind, that God loved me despite this spiritual cancer, and that someday he would let me see it as he saw it, but I didn’t know what the cancer was. So again I prayed, “God, please open my eyes to this hidden evil.”

As we drove south, I tried to make the connection between Isaiah 66:2 and 1 Corinthians 13:12. So I prayed a third time: “God, show me how these verses fit together. What do they mean for me?”

A few minutes later, my wife began talking about a movie she liked. Irritated by her insertion of such a trivial topic into my important meditation, I condescendingly criticized her and the movie. Instantly, three life-changing words knifed deep into my conscious thought. They weren’t audible, but they came so suddenly and were so completely nonvolitional that I literally lurched behind the steering wheel.

“THERE IT IS!”

“What was that?” I thought in wonder.

And then, recognizing that God had spoken to me,² I asked, “What is *IT*?”

Next an overwhelming sense of the moral ugliness of *IT*, the arrogance and pride with which I had just spoken to Judy, washed over me. In an instant I saw this sin through God’s eyes, in God’s light. For the first time I saw and felt about my pride as did God. I felt God’s hatred of my arrogance.

The next sensation was a profound conviction that despite the presence of this sin, God had loved me. For forty-five years I had been the poster boy for this sin, and yet God had loved me anyway. For a brief second I knew Bill Farley as *God* knew me. It was painful and wonderful at the same time. I saw my pride as God saw it. It was repulsive. Then I wept tears of joy as I saw God’s indescribable love for one so unworthy.

Those three words radically changed my life. It was a huge turning point. I was permanently changed. Once home, I began to study Isaiah 66:2. The pages that follow are the fruit of this ongoing study.

The bottom line is this: The indispensable virtue, the one needed for intimacy with God and all spiritual fruitfulness, is humility—what Jesus also called being “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3). About this virtue, and its importance, I was relatively ignorant.

Humility should be the aim of the spiritual disciplines. You can witness, serve, study your Bible, and pray, and not grow in this virtue. In fact, these disciplines can inadvertently have the opposite effect. They can actually amplify your pride. The Pharisees were exceedingly disciplined, yet pride in their discipline was their primary characteristic, and that is why God opposed them. The Bible repeatedly warns, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6, quoting Prov. 3:34). God opposed the Pharisees by hiding him-

self from them; and he graces the humble by drawing them into a deeper experience of their relationship with himself. “He regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar” (Ps. 138:6). Spiritual disciplines are an important means of grace. We should practice them. But if they are making you proud, they might be counterproductive; in fact, they might be a stumbling block—a wedge between you and God.

Why is humility the indispensable virtue? You can’t get close to God without it. You can’t love God or man without it. You can’t obey without it. You can’t become anything that God wants you to be without it. “This [humility] is a great and most essential thing in true religion,” wrote Jonathan Edwards. “The whole frame of the gospel, everything appertaining to the new covenant, and all God’s dispensations towards fallen man, *are calculated to bring to pass this effect.*”³

If this is true, and it is, replicating humility should be the fundamental goal of our ministry. Whether preaching, counseling, or witnessing, our goal should be a growing faith rooted in the rich compost of humility.

HUMILITY AND PRIDE DEFINED

Humility is one of the least understood spiritual fruits. It is not self-hatred or lack of self-confidence. Humility and low self-image are not the same thing. Indeed, they are polar opposites. Increasing humility brings rest with self, with God, and with life’s circumstances. It produces real lasting joy and healthy self-image. Humility is the ability to see spiritual reality, to see things as they really are. *It is the capacity to see myself in God’s light, in the context of his holiness and my sinfulness.* In other words, it is the ability to see self, and this world, through God’s eyes. God empowers the humble person to increasingly see himself as he really is: “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). The person growing in humility sees his gifts and faults,

his strengths and weaknesses, with increasing clarity. Ironically, as we will see, this humility lays the sure foundation for real contentment and healthy self-image because the humble Christian also increasingly sees and *feels* God’s great personal love. The truly humble believer has a low view of himself, but an increasingly high view of God and his fellow man.

Pride is the opposite. It is spiritual blindness. It is a delusional, inflated view of self. It is unreality on steroids. And the scary part is this: The thing to which we are most blind is our pride. A demonic Catch-22, pride causes us to chase our spiritual tails. We cannot see pride—even though it is our most grievous, disabling sin—because its very nature is blindness, and the first thing to which it is blind is its own existence. Even though God was speaking to me about my arrogance through Isaiah 66:2 and 1 Corinthians 13:12, because pride blinded me I could not see it. Dazzled by my own self-respect, I could not see my failings. Pride is a spiritual veil blinding us to the truth about ourselves and God. The proud person has a high view of self but a low view of God and his brother.

“There is no fault which we are more *unconscious* of in ourselves,” wrote C. S. Lewis. “If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”⁴

Here is the great paradox: the proud man thinks he is humble, but the humble man thinks he is proud. The humble man sees his arrogance. He sees it clearly, and as a result he aggressively pursues a life of humility, but he doesn’t think of himself as humble. The proud man is completely unaware of his pride. Of all men he is most convinced that he is humble.

WHERE PRIDE AND HUMILITY TAKE US

Notice that Isaiah 66:2 reads, “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.” There is an important progression in this text.

Humility always blossoms into something more beautiful. It is the root that feeds the other spiritual fruits. In this verse it leads to real contrition, which then deepens into trembling at God’s Word. In other words, humility sensitizes us to God’s Word, motivating and equipping us to hear God’s voice. (See below.) Humility provoked Paul to write: “work out your own salvation with fear and *trembling*” (Phil. 2:12). It motivated David to “rejoice with *trembling*” (Ps. 2:11). Humility enhances our love for God’s Word and our dependence on God’s Word. The humble joyfully tremble at God’s Word, eager to obey, seeking God’s encouragement and correction.

Humility → Contrition → Trembling

Pride, on the other hand, metamorphoses into something more dreadful. It is the fountainhead of evil. Instead of contrition, pride morphs into self-righteousness, and instead of trembling at God’s Word, self-righteousness terminates in *despising* God’s Word, or at best apathy.⁵ (See below.) This can happen to well-intentioned Christians—even men like David. When Nathan confronted David about his sin with Bathsheba, the prophet accused David of “*despis[ing]* the word of the LORD” (2 Sam. 12:9). To God, the conviction that we are above his threats is the sin of despising him. David must have thought, *I can commit adultery and get away with it. After all, I’m the man after God’s own heart.* But no one “trembles” at God’s Word and disobeys God, as David did. In other words, we sin because we are proud, and God sees our pride as the sin of despising him. A proud man cannot tremble at God’s Word.

Pride → Self Righteousness → Despising God’s Word

Not so the humble man, the one who trembles at God’s Word. He takes God’s Word seriously. He believes its promises

and threats, and he trembles. He fears God. He loves God. He needs God. He abides in the love of God. God’s Word is a heart-piercing arrow, and he loves its convicting, piercing work. He knows what he deserves, and every day he revels in the amazing grace of God that has sheltered him from the terrors of God’s justice.

Since humility ends in trembling at God’s Word, it brings us into real communion with God. It sensitizes us to God’s voice. It opens our ears to his instructions. It amplifies gratitude. It intensifies dependence. In other words, the humble see their need for God. That is why the Bible tells us:

- God *esteems* the humble (Isa. 66:2).
- He *dwells* with the “contrite and lowly” (Isa. 57:15).
- He *blesses* the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3).
- He *graces* the humble (James 4:6).
- He *guides* and *teaches* the humble (Ps. 25:9).
- He *regards* the lowly (Ps. 138:6).

Because we are blind to our pride, it is always a problem. But there is a sense in which it is especially pernicious today. Humility has almost disappeared from our spiritual lexicon. “What has changed,” notes Cornelius Plantinga, “is that, in much of contemporary American culture, aggressive self-regard is no longer viewed with alarm. Instead people praise and promote it.”⁶

Self-esteem, self-promotion, self-congratulation, and self-admiration are now celebrated as virtues. Western culture has evangelized the church. But God calls his people to be different, to separate themselves from the values of this fallen world.

So far, we have noted that humility is necessary for both intimacy with God and spiritual fruitfulness. We have defined *humility*. We have noted where both pride and humility take

us. The remainder of this chapter will make four observations to attempt to convince you that humility matters:

- First, humility is necessary for conversion.
- Second, humility is necessary for sanctification.
- Third, we need humility to see what God is doing.
- Fourth, the gospel demonstrates humility and produces a faith that culminates in growing humility.

HUMILITY PRECEDES CONVERSION

God saves those who believe, not those who work. But the belief that saves always produces some level of humbling. The bad news humbles us and prepares us for the good news. By *bad news* I mean the doctrines of God’s wrath, the final judgment, and the sinfulness of man.

The bad news is conspicuously absent from the modern church. Millions attend Christian churches with a “faith” that has produced little or no humbling. For example, multitudes of regular churchgoers have never been taught the doctrine of sin. According to George Barna, over 70 percent of professing Christians in North America don’t understand, or believe in, original sin. They believe that men and women are basically good.⁷ But true faith, the faith that saves, teaches us about sin. It always humbles. If there is no humbling, it is unlikely that saving faith has occurred.

Augustine (354–430) popularized this insight. He suggested that humility is the soil from which all the virtues grow and pride the soil that produces the vices. Until the Reformation, this view was generally accepted. Then John Calvin (1509–64), who was a student and fan of Augustine, suggested a deeper analysis. Just as unbelief is the source of pride, faith is the beginning and source of humility. Think about it. Real, heartfelt faith in the gospel always humbles. After all, it is a

message about man in sin, under judgment, standing before an angry God, but a God who wants to be our friend. Our predicament is bad. We cannot improve it with human effort. God is the only One who can solve our problem, and God commands us to respond—but not by “trying harder.” Instead, we are to abandon all confidence in human effort. We are to merely believe, repent, and live by *unmerited* favor. No matter how you slice it, this is humbling. By contrast, unbelief says, “I am good enough. Surely, if God exists, he will accept me. After all, I am every bit as good as my neighbor.” These attitudes are fruits of arrogance.

In other words, biblical faith always initiates a humbling process. By contrast, unbelief promotes arrogance. You can profess belief in an orthodox creed and lack this humbling faith. If humility is this important, it stands to reason that God has designed the gospel to produce the kind of faith that humbles men and women, that brings them face-to-face with their moral and spiritual bankruptcy, that confronts them with God’s gracious solution.

That is the argument of this book. I hope to convince you, and in the process change the way you conduct ministry.

This humbling occurs when we assent to certain vital truths. For example, justification is by faith alone. This doctrine assumes that I am hopelessly lost, that my moral condition is desperate, and that my best efforts will avail me nothing. I am a sinner and cannot save myself. My only hope is God’s mercy. I enter into it by believing, not working. This is humbling.

Saving faith also confesses that I am not smart enough to make my own rules. It believes that God knows best what is right and wrong. It concurs with the Bible about who God is, the sinfulness of sin, God’s sovereignty in creation and salvation, the nature of Jesus Christ, and a host of other issues. Saving faith confesses that hell is real, that I am in deep trouble

with God, and that I will end up in hell unless I put my trust in Christ’s sinless life and substitutionary death. Saving faith confesses that Christ is Lord and decides to obey him. Each confession makes us smaller and Christ larger.

Therefore, we should not be surprised when Scripture reads: “You *save* a humble people” (Ps. 18:27); “The LORD . . . *adorns* the humble with salvation” (Ps. 149:4); “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for *theirs is the kingdom* of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). In the Matthew verse, “poor in spirit” is a synonym for humility. Later Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never *enter* the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). Becoming childlike implies simplicity, dependence, and above all humility. Each of these texts implies one thing: humility is a prerequisite for conversion. Scripture does not say that we are saved by humility. We are saved by faith alone. These texts want us to know that the faith that saves immediately begins the humbling process. If that is the case, we should seek to communicate a message that humbles. To do this, our gospel must begin with the bad news *before* it progresses to the good news.

None of this should surprise us. If the great sin is pride, God must have designed the mechanics of conversion to produce its opposite: humility. Jonathan Edwards notes that humility “is a great and most essential thing in true religion.” Then he says, “*The whole frame of the gospel, and everything appertaining to the new covenant, and all God’s dispensations towards fallen man, are calculated to bring to pass this effect [humility] in the hearts of men. They that are destitute of this, have no true religion, whatever profession they may make, and how high soever their religious affections may be.*”⁸

The Pharisees were Jesus’ enemies. They resisted him at every turn. Why? They were proud, and their pride barred them from salvation. They refused to do what those who get saved do. They refused to humble themselves. With this in

mind, Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). For the Pharisee, salvation meant renouncing confidence in his righteousness. It meant admitting that despite his formidable self-discipline, he is “sick.” This they were unwilling to do.

The Pharisees were the neediest people in Israel. They were sinners under the wrath of God, hurtling headlong toward final judgment, yet they refused to humble themselves and believe. Why? They were convinced of their goodness. They thought they could merit God’s favor. It is no different today. The default condition of every unbeliever is Pharisee to the core.

If this is true, we should seek to humble those to whom we communicate the gospel. In later chapters, we will see that this is exactly what God has designed the gospel to do. We will also discuss ways to help those to whom we minister humble themselves so that they can be converted.

HUMILITY PRECEDES SANCTIFICATION

Humility also matters because it is necessary for sanctification. *Sanctification* is the theological term for the process of growth in godliness that occurs over time in all true believers. I grow asparagus in my garden. Asparagus thrive on steer manure. Last year I failed to fertilize them. The crop was sparse and short-lived. Humility is the same. All the fruits of the Spirit feed on it. It is the necessary fertilizer that nourishes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

After the first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” seven more follow—mourning for sin, meekness, hungering for righteousness, the capacity to be merciful, purity of heart, peacemaking, and the willingness to be persecuted for righteousness’ sake. They all have this in common: they require

poverty of spirit, the idea conveyed by the first beatitude. In other words, they require humility.

The first three spiritual fruits mentioned in Galatians 5—love, joy, and peace—make a good case study. To love someone else, you must humble yourself and “count [the other person] more significant than” yourself (Phil. 2:3). The lower Paul went in his own eyes, the higher others arose, and the greater his capacity to love them. “For Christ’s love compels us,” he confessed to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 5:14 NIV). How did it compel Paul? It compelled him to make the most stupendous love sacrifices ever recorded this side of Christ’s cross. He did this because the needs of others were more important than his own. This is what it means to be humble. It does not mean a bad opinion of self relative to others. It means not thinking about yourself at all. It means making others more significant than yourself by focusing entirely on their needs and wants (see Phil. 2:3–5).

Humility is also the fertilizer that feeds joy. It is no accident that the great passage on humility—Philippians 2:5–8—is contained in the letter that mentions joy more frequently than any other book of the Bible. What is the connection? Humble people are happy people. They have no secret ambition to be somebody. They are at rest. They serve a big God, and that also is a source of joy. The knowledge of God’s love (a love revealed increasingly to the humble) is another source of joy. The love for God that follows humility also inspires joy. Finally, they “overflow with thanksgiving” (Col. 2:7 NLT). Why? They know what they deserve: eternal judgment. No matter how bad life gets, they are never getting what they really deserve, and for this reason they abound with gratitude.

Humility produces peace. Personal peace with God, man, and circumstances is a fruit of humility. “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). This means, assuming that we have repented of sin, that our peace with God does not rise and fall on our performance. It rises and

falls on Christ’s performance provided by God the Father for our salvation. Failure to do our devotions does not disturb our peace with God. Assuming that we have repented, failure to perform our parenting or marital duties does not disturb our peace with God. In the same way, a bout of impulsive spending cannot disturb our peace with God. Why? Such peace doesn’t depend on our righteousness. That peace depends on Christ’s righteousness imputed to us. It takes growing humility to accept this fact. Pride is the root of all performance-based acceptance. Humility is required for “the peace that surpasses understanding” that Paul said would “guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). Like Paul, humble people are intensely aware of their sin, but because they are humble, they are even more aware of God’s mercy and grace. That is why they enjoy peace with God and man. Ultimately, they know that nothing depends on them.

In the same way, humility precedes the other fruits—patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is a second reason why we should pursue humility. And it is why Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with an exhortation to display poverty of spirit.

HUMILITY EQUIPS US TO SEE WHAT GOD IS DOING

There is a third reason that humility matters. Spiritual pride hardens us to what God is doing, while humility does just the opposite. It opens our eyes to what God is doing. Since whatever God is doing is always humbling, and since religious pride hates to be humbled, religious pride always resists God’s activity even while it thinks it is serving God.

Jesus was able to work with adulterers, thieves, and criminals, but the Pharisees were his implacable enemies. They could not see God at work in Christ, and religious pride was their defining sin. Religious pride hates what God is doing. It

has no capacity to discern what God is doing. It has no capacity to enter into what God is doing. It lacks the ability to join God in what he is doing. Instead, it aggressively resists and persecutes God’s work.

Jesus tried to humble the Pharisees. How did they respond? They crucified him and thought they were doing God a favor. Each of us is capable of doing the same.

That is why Scripture says, “The LORD detests all the proud of heart” (Prov. 16:5 NIV); “I hate pride and arrogance” (Prov. 8:13 NIV). *Hate* is a strong word. Yet God hates pride. He hates it because it aggressively resists his agenda.

Religious pride has many discernible symptoms. Critical speech is one. The feeling of spiritual elitism is another. After my conversion I joined a vibrant, growing church. We believed that we were on the inside track. We were working where God was working. We began to feel sorry for the other churches that weren’t as discerning as we were. I couldn’t see why every Christian didn’t join our church. *If the other churches were really listening to God, I reasoned, they would do what we are doing.* This is how spiritual pride thinks. It is ugly, and God always resists it.

Spiritual pride is the great temptation of religious people. The Holy Spirit converts us; then the devil attempts to morph the good that God has done into this anti-God state of mind. Spiritual pride deafened the Pharisees to Jesus’ words and work. It has been this way throughout history. Religion is always the first institution to persecute and resist whatever God’s Spirit is doing. It must. Pride is blindness. And religious pride is always blind to what the Holy Spirit is doing.

Here is the bottom line. Since God’s activity always humbles, and since spiritual pride hates to be humbled, it resists God’s work. As we have seen, the Pharisees crucified Jesus. The Jews persecuted Paul. To the degree that spiritual pride permeates our lives, we will also resist the work of the Holy Spirit. By contrast, humility frees us to join God in his work.

THE GOSPEL IS A DISPLAY OF HUMILITY

The fourth and last reason humility is so important is that the gospel is a display of humility. If the root of evil is pride, and if the main virtue needed is humility, then we would expect Jesus' life and death to be a pride-conquering display of soul-abasing humility. And that is what we find. This is how the second chapter of Philippians describes the gospel. Jesus washed away our filthy pride with the cleansing power of divine humility.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant [slave], being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8)

In seventy short English words Paul sums up the life of Christ, and what he describes is a galactic *descent* of infinite dimensions. I say “infinite” purposefully. By definition, the distance between anything infinite and anything finite is infinite. The distance never lessens. You never arrive at something infinite. It stretches out forever. Christ's status before becoming man was “infinite.” His post-birth human status was finite. Therefore, his incarnation was an infinite descent. It cannot be measured. John Flavel (1627–91), one of the English Puritan preachers, summed it up this way:

For the sun to fall from its sphere, and be degraded into a wandering atom; for an angel to be turned out of heaven, and be converted into a silly fly or worm, had been no such great abasement; for they were but creatures before, and so they would abide still, though in an inferior order or

species of creatures. The distance betwixt the highest and lowest species of creatures, is but a finite distance. The angel and the worm dwell not so far apart. But for the infinite glorious Creator of all things, to become a creature, is a mystery exceeding all human understanding. The distance between God and the highest order of creatures, is an infinite distance.⁹

God is infinitely just, and his law must be satisfied. “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,” Jesus warned, “and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). It is an immutable spiritual principle. God has engraved it into the very fabric of creation. No creature can be exalted to heavenly reward until it has first thoroughly humbled itself with obedience. We have a major problem. We have all exalted ourselves in disobedience.

That is why Christ descended an infinite distance and became flesh—to satisfy God’s justice for proud sinners like you and me. When we believe, God unites us with Christ in his descent, which culminated in the cross. When God exalted Christ through his resurrection and ascension, we were exalted with him. Christ’s humiliation makes our exaltation possible.

Notice: If it took an infinite descent to atone for our pride, then it follows that our pride must be infinitely offensive to God. It also follows that unforgiven pride must receive an infinite punishment. That is why hell is eternal. It never ends. The offense is so great that a suffering of infinite duration cannot satisfy God’s justice and qualify the sinner for heavenly reward.

Christ’s incarnation is the measure of God’s hatred of pride. It is also the measure of his infinite love for proud, undeserving people like you and me. Only an infinite descent can adequately express God’s love, a love that Paul said “surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19).

WHERE THIS BOOK IS GOING

I hope this chapter has convinced you of the importance of humility. Without it, there is no salvation or sanctification. Instead, there is violent hatred and persecution of all that God’s Spirit is doing. The gospel is a display of heavenly humility.

If humility is this important, then every aspect of Christian ministry should be a humbling ministry. We should pursue humility in our personal lives, and we should engineer Christian ministry to produce it in those we love. “Ministry” applies to parents, Christians attempting to evangelize their friends, pastors, Christian counselors, Bible study leaders, Sunday school teachers, local church elders, and others. All should communicate a gospel that humbles those they serve.

Because we are a proud culture, it is hard for us to see the extent of our problem. Chapter 2 will attempt to convince us that pride is our cultural sin. It will use the social sciences, great Christian leaders of past centuries, and biblical testimony to make this point.

CONCLUSION

I was a Christian twenty-two years before I began to understand my personal arrogance. The understanding started on Oregon’s coastal highway in the fall of 1993, and it was all God’s gracious, undeserved gift. God let me see my pride as he saw it, and everything changed.

We have seen that humility is not a negative view of self. Rather, it is the God-given ability to see self and God as we really are. Humility is the key to intimacy with God. It is the doorway to personal happiness.

We have also learned that humility and pride have consequences. Humility produces contrition, which causes us to

tremble at God’s Word. Pride produces self-righteousness, which leads to despising or rejecting God’s Word.

Although there are many reasons why humility matters, this chapter focused on four. First, it is necessary for conversion. Second, it is necessary for sanctification. Third, it enables us to see what God is doing. Fourth, this subject is so important that God sent his Son to put on a massive display of humility and save us through it.

We have noted that pride is blindness. It follows that a proud culture will be least able to see that it has a problem with pride. We are a proud culture. The point of the next chapter is to convince us of the extent and magnitude of our arrogance.