

Leadership Qualities: Humility

Dr. Kenneth Boa

Woody Allen is credited with saying, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.” We could add to it, “If you want to hear him laugh even louder, tell him how much you know.” Just because it’s true, however, doesn’t make it easy to accept. It’s hard to admit that we do not know as much as we think we know. And we certainly aren’t in control of as much as we’d like to think. We make our plans, but it is God who controls the outcome. We make our plans, but we understand that, if the Lord wills, we shall *live* let alone do this or that (James 4:13-15).

John Ruskin said, “I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I don’t mean by humility, doubt of his power. But really great men have a curious feeling that the greatness is not of them, but through them. And they see something divine in every other man and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful.”

The modern notion of the “self-made” man, pulling himself up by his own bootstraps and, by the sweat of his own brow, climbing to the pinnacle of success is so deeply imbedded in our consciousness that any other possibility seems foreign. It’s humbling to recognize that God is more responsible for the achievements of our lives than we are, that we are people who have been *given* our abilities, time and opportunities. These things are not our possession; they are gifts from God and we will ultimately give an account for what we do with what we have been given.

Everything in us strains against this notion, for to accept his as fact is to be humbled. And humility naturally leads to submission. That’s really the issue, isn’t it? We don’t want to admit that God is the giver of every good gift, because that would mean that we have to yield to his agenda. Humility, submission and obedience go together.

This doesn't come easily, and it is certainly not natural; we need help to learn how to live this way. This is one reason why we have the Bible. In the pages of Scripture we find many examples of humility. From them we can gain insight and assistance as we endeavor to be the kind of leaders God desires and our world so desperately needs.

The Humility of God

Let us first examine the supreme biblical example of humility: the incarnate God who made himself known in our world. In Philippians 2, we learn about Christ's self-emptying servant nature. Here we find an important principle in Scripture: before honor comes humility. The cross comes before the crown; the person who seeks honor will ultimately be humiliated, but the person who humbles himself will later be honored (Matt. 23:12).

Humility is such an illusive virtue, isn't it? As soon as you think you've got it, you don't. That's part of the problem: When I finally achieve humility, I get proud of myself. My humility cries out for recognition. Humility is terribly fragile.

Part of the reason for its elusiveness is that humility has a difficult time co-existing with self-awareness. True humility comes when we are consumed with awareness of Another. According to Thomas Alexander Fyfe's book *Who's Who in Dickens*, Uriah Heep, one of Dickens' characters in *David Copperfield*, is "a hypocritical plotter who feigned humility; a swindler and forger who was ultimately exposed." He is fond of quoting his father, "Be umble, Uriah, says father to me, and you'll get on." Yet, at one point in the book he says to Master Copperfield, "Ah! But you know we're so very umble.... And having such a knowledge of our own umbleness, we must really take care that we're not pushed to the wall by them as isn't umble."

Saying you're humble or thinking of yourself as a modest man is actually a perverted form of pride. The key to humility is to get your eyes off yourself and onto the one from whom and for whom and through whom all things are (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16-20).

The church in Philippi was experiencing some tension, and in Philippians 2, Paul tells us that one of the keys to unity in the church is being focused on the same thing.

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others as better than yourselves. Each of you should not look only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:1-4

To avoid disharmony in the body of Christ, we must all have "the same love" – Jesus Christ. The more we love Jesus, the more we have a capacity to love one another. Then, and only then, can there exist a united sense of purpose. Then we can refrain from manipulation or self-serving actions. Then we can serve others selflessly.

These are not easy things to do. It isn't natural for us to consider the needs of others before our own. The only way you'll be able to do that is if you follow the model of Christ. Jesus was able to serve others without regard for receiving service in return because he was so completely secure in his identity. We see this clearly in John 13 where Jesus performs the visual parable of washing the feet of the disciples.

The Scriptures tell us that he understood three things before he assumed the role of a lowly servant and began to wash the feet of the disciples: Jesus understood where he had come from, that all things had been given to him and where his final destiny would lead Him (John 13:3). In other words, he understood his true identity, true dignity and true significance. He knew who he was, why he had come and where he was going.

Likewise, you and I, as new creations in Christ, can have the same security. We have transferred our trust from ourselves to him, and in so doing we receive the abundant life he promised us (John 10:10). We are no longer in the line of Adam; we are in the line of Christ (Rom. 5:12-21). The significance of this may escape us, but this means nothing less than that we have come forth from God (John 1:12-13; 3:6). It means that every spiritual blessing has been given to us (Eph. 1:3). It means that our eternal destiny is at home in heaven (Phil. 3:20-21).

One of the motifs of C.S. Lewis' life was *Sehnsücht*, which means longing, this sense of desire that he had. I recently read a book called *The Question of God* by Dr. Armand Nicholi, who teaches both at the Harvard Medical School and Harvard University. He's been teaching a course for the last 25 or 30 years on Sigmund Freud, comparing Him with C.S. Lewis in terms of God and religion. Both of the men talk about this issue of *Sehnsücht*, of yearning for something that we cannot seem to attain in this life.

From a biblical and theistic perspective, we understand that this longing is really something that is God-given (Eccl. 3:11). "When God wants to carry a point with his children," Emerson said, "He plants his arguments into the instincts." We each carry this desire, this nostalgia for heaven. It's an instinct for a place we have not yet seen. We don't have any memories of heaven, yet we long for it. And we realize that the great joys and pleasures of this life are only hints of home, "'patches of godlight' in the woods of our experience" as Lewis called them. There are little patches here and there, but they're not meant to be confused for home. They are not the thing itself; they point beyond themselves, like signs, to the thing we long for.

As pilgrims, aliens and strangers in this world, we must realize that we long for something this world cannot provide or sustain. Once you admit that, then you will understand

that the most foolish thing we can do is put all the freight of our desires upon a world that was not designed to sustain them. If you look to the world for fulfillment, it will let you down every time. There is always something that is not quite enough, and we long for more. We long for a security, a significance, a satisfaction that this world simply cannot provide.

Jesus knew this. That's why Paul writes,

Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Philippians 2:5-8

So far, it's not a very inspirational text. But that's just the first part. Exaltation follows the humility:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9-11

From this beautiful passage we learn three things about our Lord that model for us the essence of true humility. First, Jesus didn't selfishly cling to the outer expression of his divinity. Instead, he took the form of a servant. Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, writes: "More than any other single way, the grace of humility is worked in our lives through the discipline of serving." One of Foster's friends, the late Jamie Buckingham, took this sentiment a bit further saying, "You really know you are a true servant when you have a positive reaction toward people when they treat you like one."

In other words, the true test of humility comes when you are treated like a servant. It is one thing to choose to serve others, but it's another thing entirely to choose to be a servant. A servant is often to be taken for granted, overlooked, unnoticed. A servant gives up the right to be

in charge of whom they serve, when they serve and how long they serve. Everything in us screams out against service like this, especially if this service is rendered in secret. Our society has trained us well in the art of assertiveness, and we fear anything that even remotely resembles passivity. The notion of being taken advantage of is abhorrent to us, and we most fear becoming like the old comic strip character, Casper Milquetoast, a walking doormat with no assurance or strength.

On the contrary, humility, biblically speaking, actually comes from disciplined strength and others-centered power. It is, in fact, the strength and understanding of one's great dignity and identity in Christ. It is only through our willingness to serve that we may avoid manipulating people to get our needs met. Because of our new identity in Christ, we can serve and we don't need to be noticed or rewarded here on earth. We understand that we serve one who always sees and who has promised to reward us in eternity (Eph. 6:8).

The second thing we see in this passage is that Jesus demonstrated his humility through obedience to the Father. Instead of trying to impose our will on God, we submit to God's will for us, knowing that his agenda is better than what we would have chosen. When you trust God enough to take him at his word, you know that God's plans for you are "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future" (Jer. 29:11).

God longs to bless and reward his people, but it is essential that we be willing to turn to him and repent of our unfaithfulness and disobedience. "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with *all* your heart" (Jer. 29:13, emphasis added). We serve a God who "rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb. 11:6). God actually enjoys bestowing benefits on those who turn to him in dependence and trust.

Third, we learn the necessity of patiently waiting for God's timing. Jesus waited for his Father to lift him up. We don't grab for power; we patiently wait for God to provide the increase in his time. Jesus didn't come as a king, but as a helpless infant (Luke 2). Although he was perfectly God and perfectly human at the same time (John 1:14), he lived his life as a humble laborer. After he began his ministry, he demonstrated humble service to others in the miracles he performed, as well as in his instructions to his disciples. When the time came for him to die, he submitted to his Father's divine will (Mark 14:36). And now, seated in power at the right hand of God, he intercedes on our behalf (Acts 5:29-32). As the perfect model for godly leadership, Jesus set the perfect example of humility.

Jesus' Surprising Self-description

The Bible does not contain any physical descriptions of Jesus. However, here is an interesting passage where Jesus tells us what his character was like. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Most people are, to some extent, weary and burdened; they carry a lot of unnecessary weight on their shoulders. This is nothing new. People have been hurried and harried since the Fall, no doubt, and far too often, religious leaders hinder, rather than help, people in their search for peace and rest.

Unlike the Pharisees and other religious teachers of his day who added so many rules to God's Law that it had become a terrible burden (Luke 11:46), Jesus invites us to walk in peace and in rest, even in the context of turmoil and adversity, even in uncertainty. In fact, since we are completely helpless in our pursuit, Jesus offers to *give* his followers rest and peace (John 14:27). In placing our trust in him, we trade our incompetence for Christ's overwhelming competence. And if he is as competent as the Bible paints him to be, then the universe is, in Dallas Willard's words, a perfectly safe place for us to be.

Of course, his is only a comfort once we realize how little control we have. There is tremendous instability and uncertainty in this world. Most of the stress we endure comes because we don't know the outcome of things. There are any number of things that could happen in the course of the day – most of them are completely out of our control. If we buy into only that which we see and hear, we will become weary and burdened, because the anxieties, the uncertainties, the tensions of life can impose themselves upon us and make us anxious and fretful. But Jesus invites us, instead, to take all our anxieties to him, and he says, “In exchange for your worries and troubles I will give you rest.”

But the offer of rest for our weary souls is open only to those who will come to him and learn from him: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (v. 29a). In the ancient Middle-east they would train an animal by yoking it with a stronger animal. They'd yoke the two animals together, but it would be the larger of the two animals that would really carry the burden of the plowing. The other would be built up and trained so, eventually, it could take its full load. The imagery of his *light* yoke is that Jesus says, “Unlike the yoke of the Pharisees who want to burden you down with all sorts of excesses and dos and don'ts and regulations, I'm offering you something different. This is not loyalty to some code; this is dedication to a Person.”

He says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.” There aren't many people who can say, “I am gentle and humble in heart” and get away with it! If I were to say such a thing, you'd wonder, “Who does this guy think he is?” Yet when Jesus makes this audacious claim, it has the ring of authority. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

In Hebrews 5:8 we read that Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered.” Christ’s humility was evident in his perfect obedience to the authority and will of his Father. His mission statements from Luke 19:10 and Mark 10:45 portray the servant nature he so clearly modeled, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost;” and, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Anyone can claim to be a servant, but Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, was treated as one and never complained about it. Jesus Christ, the most powerful man ever to walk on the face of the earth, was also the most humble man who ever lived. His agenda was never to promote himself, but to please his Father by loving and serving others. We are called to emulate that humility.

The Humility of Moses

If Jesus was the perfect example of humility in the New Testament, Moses personified humility in the Old Testament. In Numbers 12:3 there is a parenthetical statement that was inserted into the text, “(Now, Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)” Moses was a man of authority and power and charisma, but he manifested this disciplined strength through his utter willingness to be pleasing to the Father.

In Isaiah 57:15 God says, “I live in a high and holy place, but also with Him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.” Later in Isaiah 66:2, we read, “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” The Bible repeatedly emphasizes that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (Ps. 138:6; Prov. 3:34; Matt. 23:12; James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). Those who are proud have an inappropriate and inflated view of themselves. They attribute their

accomplishments to their own efforts and fail to acknowledge that everything they are and have comes directly from God's hand.

One way to summarize the Bible's message is that it is God telling us, "I am God, and you are not." The quality of humility flows out of a proper assessment of ourselves before God. Moses was a powerful man, but he was also a humble man because he saw himself in the light of God and sought God's honor and reputation, not his own.

When people come to grips with their desperate need for the grace and mercy of God, there are three characteristics that become evident. First, they have a teachable spirit. They understand that they are constantly under construction. When we're young, we struggle with focus and direction and foolishness. In our middle years, we struggle with double-mindedness and entanglement. But the struggle of our older years is that we have a tendency to become unteachable. We suppose we know it all. People like that are very difficult to be around.

If anything, as the years go by, we should begin to realize how little we know and be astounded at our ignorance. It takes a certain measure of knowledge to know how little we know. That's ironic, isn't it? But the best authorities in any given field are the ones who know enough to know how little they know. When it suddenly becomes clear that you don't have it all down, it can be a difficult adjustment, especially for people who have enjoyed a modicum of success as the world defines it. Still, the first quality of true humility is a teachable spirit.

The second quality we see in a humble person is a willingness to seek wise counsel. Humble people are never too proud to seek out the wisdom of others before making important decisions. The Bible advises, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (Prov. 15:22).

The third quality of humble people is that they are willing to be under authority. This is a difficult concept, especially if you're an entrepreneur, a leader, a "self-made" man. Ultimately, we all must submit to the authority of God, but we must also yield to the authority of those he has placed us under – pastors, elders, governmental leaders. In some mysterious way, to rebel against them is to rebel against God.

Peter, as an older, wiser leader in the church writes, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:6-7). Anxiety builds up in all of us from time to time. When it does, we've taken a burden back on ourselves that we were never meant to carry. We can give it back to God and put ourselves under his mighty hand, knowing that he cares for us and will take care of recognition at the proper time. Nothing that we do for his pleasure will go unrecognized.

Solomon's Homily on Humility

Perks and privileges usually accompany successful leadership. Many leaders enjoy being in charge, making decisions that affect the organization, delegating implementation of those decisions to others, "running the show," having others defer to them in meetings and the like. As one gets ahead, it's hard not to get a big head!

As a leader, King Solomon enjoyed all these perks and much more. Like few leaders before or since, he had wealth, power, wisdom and plenty of servants. Other rulers traveled long distances to listen to his wisdom, and other entrepreneurs came to marvel at his wealth. Yet from this lofty position Solomon cautioned, "It is not good...to seek one's own honor" (Prov. 25:27). Doing so, he says, is like eating too much honey. Sweet as it is, and healthy as it is in proper amounts, too much of this good thing will make you sick – and sick of it.

Honor accompanies a job well done. If a leader is effective, he or she will get all the honor he or she can stand. But a person who has to go looking for honor has his or her hand in the wrong hive. Solomon learned that focusing on a job well done is the way to earn honor. Focusing on honor cuts into the time and energy needed to do the job well.

Most of our lives we have a hidden impact. Most of our lives, we don't know our impact. Every so often, God will give show you your impact – through a word of encouragement, maybe a note, maybe somebody will tell you something when you're down. Every so often, you may get a little feedback just to let you know you're on the right course. But if he gives you too much of that, you'll start to live for it. That's a dangerous path to walk. Jesus asks a pointed question in John 5:44 that we would do well to wrestle with, "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?"

Honor comes from God, and it comes – as counter-intuitive as this seems – as the result of downward mobility. Jesus chose downward mobility, a descent from the heights of heaven to a teenager's womb to a cattle trough to a peasant home to a dusty road to a cross to a tomb. Jesus didn't surrender a little; he surrendered everything completely, confident that his Father would take care of the outcome. The most powerful person who ever walked on the planet calls us and says, "I served you, and now I'm asking you to serve others. A servant is not greater than his master. If I did this for you, you must do this for one another. I'll take care of your dignity. You don't have to take yourself so seriously, because I take you seriously."

If a man does not understand that, he will live in constant insecurity. We all know what insecure people look like. Always searching for approval, they cannot relax. They're driven. They never reach the mark, so here's a perfectionism that torments them and everyone around

them. Often, their self-esteem is tied to their material possessions, and it's so important to always have something a little bit newer, a little bit better than the other guy. Because insecurity and envy often go together, they relentlessly find faults with others. Pride seeks the higher place; envy has to do with resenting others' good fortune. An insecure person is so focused on image rather than substance that they have a *persona*. They have an image that they have to sustain, and our culture supports that. Proud people are defensive. They cannot handle criticism or rebuke. They cannot receive it, and, therefore, it's hard for them to be teachable, because they always have to defend that image, that position.

Humility in the Face of Prosperity

Israel's pride led them to disobey God's commands, so God invested 40 years in developing their humility and obedience. God took them into the desert to show them how vulnerable they were (and how vulnerable we are). In Deuteronomy 8, we see the relationship between prosperity and humility and between difficulty and pride:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me," But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

Deuteronomy 8:10-14, 17-18

Moses exhorts the people to remember, after they take the land and flourish, that everything they have has come to them as a gift from the Lord. They are to walk in humility before their God and not think they have achieved these things themselves. One of the great dangers of success is

that we deceive ourselves into the arrogant belief that we ourselves have brought it about. We are like Bart Simpson who prays at the dinner table, “Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.”

God can give wealth, and he can give poverty. He can raise you up; he can take you down. Sometimes it is the severe mercy of God to impoverish you because you were getting too cocky. He may need to take away some of your toys until you get the message.

We are all born with closed hands. Babies come into the world with their hands balled up into tiny, little fists. As we get older, we learn to hold tightly to things – handlebars and lunchboxes, bats and balls, other people’s hands. When we start out in the business world, we grab the lowest rung on the corporate ladder, and we hold on for dear life until we can clutch the next one. We clutch and scrape for whatever position or prestige we can garner. Perhaps one day we’ll find ourselves hanging on to canes and walkers or even the edge of a hospital bed. We cling tightly to life itself until we die. Then, perhaps because our focus will no longer be on ourselves and this earthly realm, we can finally relax our grip.

What a contrast between our hands and the hands of God. Throughout the Bible story God opens his hands to provide food, protection, blessing, love and support. The Psalmist writes, “You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing” (Ps. 145:16). When God came to this earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, he taught, loved and blessed. But mostly he opened his hands and touched. He refused to clutch or cling tightly to his rights and privileges. Instead, he opened his hands and, in the most startling example of humility the world has ever known, stretched out his arms to pay for our failures.