

The Vanishing Virtue

Humility, Part 1

Philippians 2:1-2

One middle-aged pastor wrote, “We were with some friends at the fair not too long ago when we spotted a mechanical bull that people could pay to ride – and conquer. I walked up and told the bull operator that I wanted to ride. He sort of sized up my middle-aged body and asked, “Are you sure?”

Well that did it . . . I will show him . . . I can do this!

He explained to me that the bull has 12 levels of difficulty. “It might not be easy,” he said, “but the key is you have to stay in the center of the bull; just follow him and stay loose; shift your center of gravity as the bull moves.”

So I got on the bull and it started off slow, and then it began to pick up speed . . . moving faster and faster . . . I was determined . . . and I was holding on real tight.

Then I remembered his advice, so I tried to loosen up; but the bull kept moving faster and jolting and bucking and jumping. At times I was hanging on sideways – determined to win. At times my arms were flailing around and at other times I just hung on.

Finally the bull slowed down and stopped, and I was still in the saddle; it wasn't pretty, but I made it.

I imagined how surprised the operator of the bull would be that I had triumphed. So I hopped off, looked over at him and smiled triumphantly and he just shook his head, smiled back and said, “Nice job. That was level one.”¹

The author went on to talk about the blow to his sense of self-confidence – there was no way he wanted to go on to level 2; what he needed, he admitted, was a little honest humility about himself.

We often talk about our culture as a culture that is less honest than before . . . less polite . . . less cultured . . . less focused . . . less godly . . . less sacrificial . . . less pure.

I wonder if we've taken stock in the growing lack – culture wide – of humility.

That we are a “less humble” culture today.

One columnist writing for a secular source – The New York Times (you can't get any more secular than that) – he put his finger on the pulse of our world when he wrote these perceptive words; “we are an overconfident species given to the magnification of self.”

To back up these claims, he cited recent statistics and studies on the subject taken from our own American culture where pride in ourselves, is on the rise.

When pollsters asked people from around the world to rate themselves on different traits, Americans are now supplying the positive self-evaluations; and it's growing more and more ingrained in the average person's thinking.

For instance, on a survey given in the 1950's, high school seniors were asked, “Are you a very important person?” Only twelve percent agreed. But by the 1990's, that figure had risen to eighty percent.

Today, seven out of ten high school students surveyed believe they have above-average leadership skills.

One million students – including college students – were asked how well they got along with others and eighty-five percent of them rated themselves above average and none of them – that's right – not one of them said they were below average in their relational skills.

No wonder college campuses are so peaceful.

College professors led the way however in their distorted view of themselves; were asked similar questions and 88 percent rated themselves either above average or truly exceptional in their relational skills. In fact, ninety-four percent of college professors rated themselves as having above-average – to exceptional teaching skills.

Ninety-four percent considered themselves outstandingly gifted; 94 percent; I must have had the six percent.

The Wall Street article went on to make the observation that a few decades ago it would have been unthinkable for a sports athlete to celebrate *himself* in the batter's box after hitting a home run [or in the end zone after scoring a touchdown]. Today it is the routine.

Listen to this statement – again, by secular sources – and I quote – One of the clearest conclusions of social science research is that we are proud.”

“In short,” the article concluded, “there is abundant evidence that we have shifted . . . from a culture that once emphasized self-effacement—that is, we downplayed ourselves—to a culture that now glories in self-promotion.”ⁱⁱ

Which is another way of saying, in times past honest humility was a virtue . . . and that virtue is vanishing.

When a person is self-absorbed and self-promoting and self-congratulating, they are prone to being deceived, distorted in every area of life and on terribly dangerous ground.

Why? Here's the danger.

Simply put, in the words of C.S. Lewis, pride is the mother hen under which all other sins are hatched.

Pride was the very first sin – hatched in the heart of Lucifer, the highest created angelic being – but now fallen and known as Satan; for he said in his heart,

***I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
I will sit on the mount of the assembly . . .
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
I will make myself like the Most High.’ (Isaiah 14:13-14)***

5 times – I will . . . I will . . . I will . . . I will . . . I will!

Is it any wonder that the middle letter in the word “pride” is the letter “P”?

In fact, every sin can be traced to pride – no matter what it is.

Sin is mankind saying, “I will do whatever I want to do, no matter what God says.”

“I will be the master and the ruler of my own life.”

This isn't just a problem in our culture – and the problem isn't just in America . . . it has crippled many cultures before ours.

The problem is, the blindness of pride knocks on the door of every church and every Christian.

And it can lead many others astray.

Rather humorously illustrated by a pastor who wrote – I read this recently – he wrote rather transparently, I was officiating at a funeral and when I was finished, I was asked to lead the funeral procession as it made its way to the cemetery. So I got into my car and started driving at the head of the long funeral procession. I flipped on my radio and became somewhat preoccupied, lost in thought; I forgot where I was even going and about that time I passed a Walmart and remembered something I needed to pick up and I turned into the parking lot. Moments later I glanced in my rear-view mirror and saw a long line of cars pulling into Walmart behind me with their lights on. I was self-absorbed . . . I had forgotten where I was going . . . and then I was greatly humbled.ⁱⁱⁱ

Which is the direction, the Apostle Paul wants the church to drive – not into some parking lot – but toward greater humility.

It isn't enough to recognize the problem we all battle with pride and self . . . we need a divinely inspired text to provide directions toward a life and spirit and mindset and attitude of humility.

Let's not forget where we're going . . . and who we are.

With that, we arrive at Philippians chapter 2.

Over the next few months the title of our studies together will simply fall under the heading of this one word – Humility.

Now understand here at the outset, that biblical humility isn't thinking low of yourself, or poorly of yourself – running yourself down – that might even be a form of pride to gain attention.

True humility, Andrew Murray wrote, isn't thinking meanly of yourself; humility is when you do not think of yourself at all.^{iv}

Now in this chapter, the Spirit of God through the Apostle Paul will:

- unapologetically command humility;

- he will beautifully illustrate humility in Jesus Christ;
- and he will clearly apply it, not only to the church, to but every Christian.

And he begins with a series of statements, beginning in *verse 1*. ***If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete.***

Stop for a moment.

Four times, Paul writes if there is . . . ***if there is***.

In the original language, these “if” statements are what linguists call, “first class conditional clauses” . . . I know how terribly exciting that is.

But it actually is. You might be led to think that Paul is wondering if these four propositions are true! “Is there encouragement in Christ? Is there consolation of love; is there fellowship of the Spirit? Is there?”

The particle “if” (εἰ) with an indicative verb can be understood as “since”.^v

In other words, you could read it like this: “Since there is encouragement in Christ, since there is consolation of love; since there is any fellowship of the Spirit . . .

But of course, that leads you to wonder – why doesn’t Paul just write, “Since”? Why “If”?

What Paul is actually doing is using an approach that logically herds us toward the right conclusion. He’s like a trial lawyer, bringing the witness to agree to certain things that then demand only one response.

One author writes that what Paul does here is the same thing a parent does when they make a point with their child. [And parents end up being skillful trial lawyers, right?] What Paul does here is something parents do – we pose questions that have to be answered with “yes” and then drive home the conclusion.^{vi}

Here’s how it works:

You ask your young son something like –

“Do you care about your little sister’s feelings?”

“Yes . . . sort of.”

“Okay, then do you think she would appreciate it if you stopped running over her favorite doll with your Tonka truck?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Do you want her to be glad that you’re her big brother?”

“Yes”.

“Well then, if all that’s true, then why don’t you start setting a good example for her out there in the backyard?”

If . . . then . . . if these things are true . . . then this ought to happen!

These four phrases are not possibilities – they are certainties.^{vii}

You could reword what Paul is effectively saying with yes/no questions:

Is there is encouragement in Christ?

Well, yes.

Is there consolation in His love?

Sure, I know that’s true.

Is there fellowship in the Holy Spirit?

Yes, I’m sure there is.

Is there any affection or compassion from God?

Yes, absolutely.^{viii}

Well then, if all of these things are true – and they are – and since they are true – complete my joy by demonstrating humility in unity.

In other words, if this is true and if this is true and if this is true and if this is true – ***then*** – do something about it.

Dwight Pentecost paraphrases it this way – If there is any encouragement in Christ – and there certainly is; if there is any consolation of love – and there certainly is; if there is any fellowship of the Spirit – and there certainly is; if there is any affection and compassion – and there certainly is – then – here it is fulfill my joy [by being unified in humility].^{ix}

You see, these four phrases are not only four supernatural realities – they should be four experiences of every Christian.^x

Let’s take a closer look at them.

a. First, Paul refers to ***encouragement in Christ***

The word ***encouragement*** is from paraklesis (παράκλησις) and it can be translated comfort or exhortation.^{xi}

Paul effectively asks the Philippian congregation – have any of you experienced the comfort and encouragement of Jesus Christ?

And they would all respond in unison – absolutely!

It began at salvation and it changed everything.

I’ll be at a funeral this afternoon for a man who accepted Christ 10 months ago at his kitchen table – tears rolling down his cheeks.

A Jewish man I would often see at the car dealership over the years up the street at Crossroads Ford. He was the manager of sales and had visited Colonial a few times when his children were small – some 20 years ago.

I would talk to him about the gospel . . . I would invite him to come to church and he'd always say, "Oh no . . . Sunday is the perfect day for golf."

I lost touch with him over the years until 10 months ago when his daughter, Jess, now grown up and married, wrote me and said, "I don't know if you'd remember my father . . . but he has stage four cancer and I think he wants to talk to you.

I came over, opened the Old Testament and explained the gospel – and asked him if he understood and desired to make Jesus Christ – the suffering, dying Savior – his Messiah. And with tears rolling down his cheeks he said yes.

Did he ever change . . . he sat right down front here to my right until he couldn't attend anymore.

Before I left for Israel – the family informed me that Hospice had been called . . . I went over to see him . . . I told him, "Hey, I'm going to the land of your fathers . . . a place where we will live forever one day, with Christ."

I read John's description of the New Jerusalem – the Holy City – from **Revelation 21 & 22**. And Eric just drank it in.

He had discovered no greater encouragement than in Christ.

Later on in this text, Paul will effectively tell the Christian not to keep this news to ourselves.

That's the idea here – not only are these statements spiritual realities found in the Lord – they are to be delivered and declared and demonstrated to one another.

Paul speaks to this issue when he uses the same word for encouragement or comfort as he writes to the Corinthian believers, referring to God as ***the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction . . . and that isn't the end of it . . . so that we can comfort those in any affliction with the comfort we ourselves receive from God (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)***.

And what is that going to require? Humility and self-sacrifice.

Pride and self-serving will be more than happy to receive comfort from God for all our afflictions.

But to see the troubles – to see the sorrows – to see the suffering in someone else's life and go and minister comfort to them; my goodness, that would

mean you'd have to actually take your eyes off yourself and see those around you!

Pride blinds us to others . . . pride covers our ears and binds our hands.

Humility allows you to observe the pain and suffering of someone else; humility compels you to not only observe it, but do something about it!

b. Secondly, Paul speaks in verse 1 of the ***consolation of love***

This is a reference to the love of Jesus Christ for us.

It can be translated literally – speaking in a friendly manner to another person.^{xii}

The word for consolation refers to speaking closely with someone to offer solace.^{xiii}

Just two days ago I stepped into another room . . . the room of a woman very close now to death – a Christian whose legacy of faith and joy has become a part of her own daughter's life, who belongs to this church with her husband and children.

I stepped into that room and watched and listened for a while as Lisa sat by her mother's bed, her back to the door, quietly reading to her mom from different passages of scripture.

Reading solace into her mother's heart; when I finally stepped in, she was reading to her mother the lyrics of a hymn.

I recognized them . . . I told her that it was one of my wife's favorite hymns. She said, "Do you know it? I said, "Yea." She said, "Would you sing it?"

Like, as in a solo? I sound a lot better with an orchestra and a 1,000 people!

"Yes", she said, "please sing it for us".

So I did . . . trust me, I changed key three different times and created a new melody line when I forgot the old one – fortunately they didn't know any different.

The lyrics go like this:

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;

He sendeth more strength when the labors increase

To added affliction He addeth His mercy;

To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance

When our strength has failed ere' the day is half done,

When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,

Our Father's full giving is only begun.

*His love has no limit; His grace has no measure;
His power has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth and giveth and giveth again.^{xiv}*

That moment, in that hospital room was nothing less than delivering the consolation of the love of Christ.

And what love!

But God demonstrated His love in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

What kind of humility was that . . . how humble of God!

Paul will later describe it in this chapter as the ultimate, mind boggling humility of the King of Kings, who became the servant of mankind.

How consoling is it that God would hunt us down to save us . . . that God would choose us to be the Bride of His Son . . . that God would take pleasure in offering us eternal life and a regal throne and never-ending joy.

How humble must God be to offer that kind of consolation to us?

Paul will connect the dots later – love like that is *impossible* without humility.

c. Thirdly, Paul points next in **verse 1** to the ***fellowship of the Spirit***

The *koinonia* of the Spirit.

We've already encountered that word for partnership or fellowship – *koinonia* (κοινωνία)

In **chapter 1** Paul referred to the Philippians *koinonia* with him in the gospel.

Remember, *koinonia* is much more than potlucks and small groups. *Koinonia* was actually a word that referred to a joint venture.

I found it interesting to discover that in secular Greek culture, the word *koinonia* referred to inheriting a common possession.

In Paul's day, if heirs inherited a piece of property; common possession meant that each heir wasn't inheriting a piece of the property, they were all becoming part owner of the entire piece of property.^{xv}

This has powerful application to this spiritual reality.

The apostle Paul is telling us that believers in Christ are heirs to the Holy Spirit – we have a

common possession of the Holy Spirit – you guys over here don't have a little piece of him – and you guys back there have a piece of Him and Christians in other churches and in other countries get a little bit of Him too – no!

Every believer has common possession – by faith in Christ we ***have all been made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13)***; we are all ***the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19)***.

In other words, we have all inherited from God – the entire **property** – in this case – the entire **person** of the Holy Spirit.

Our fellowship with the Spirit is complete.

Now again – this is a spiritual reality that must be demonstrated in living reality.

If the Spirit condescends in great humility to fellowship with us, how willing are we to fellowship with each other?

Does it bother you that you are worshipping with people that you did not hand pick?

In other words, if the Spirit of God recognizes us as joint heir with Christ, how do we recognize each other? How do we view one another?

I love C.S. Lewis' insight when he wrote decades ago – and I've edited it down to make this one point – “. . . remember that the most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would strongly be tempted to worship . . . it is in [this light] that we should conduct all our dealings with one another . . . there are no ordinary people . . . you have never talked to a mere mortal.^{xvi}

d. Fourthly, Paul points out the reality of ***affection and compassion – in the last part of verse 1.***

Affection is a word that refers to the inner person. Your King James translation will translate it ***bowels of mercy.***

That's actually a good translation, although a bit brutal.

You see, the generation of Paul considered the bowels – the inner organs – even the intestines – to be the seat – the origin – the source – of emotion. It's the word *splanchna* (σπλᾶγχνα) - deep, emotional feelings.

If Paul ran Hallmark there in the hills of Judea, all the Valentine cards back then would have read something like:

- “I love you with all my entrails” –

- “I have you forever in my kidneys” –
- “I have a longing for you down deep in my colon.”

Over time – and to this day – the organ of the heart became viewed as the central seat of emotion; which is great, because “I love you with all my heart” sounds so much better than “I love you with all my liver.”

The next word Paul introduces here as a further demonstration of humility is a word that refers to tender *mercies* or *compassion*.

This word specifically refers to displaying concern over someone’s misfortune. In other contexts, Paul uses the word to talk about the compassion of God; Paul writes in *2 Corinthians 1:3 – that God is the Father of mercies.*^{xvii}

What’s important to recognize here is that these words are intertwined – you can’t have one without the other!

Affection is the internal source of the emotion and *compassion* is the actual expression of that emotion. One author called *affection* the root and *compassion* the fruit.^{xviii}

Since all four of these propositions are realities – Paul now drives home the point where he says as verse 2 opens: *make my joy complete*.

This is an imperative – *fulfill my joy by being of the same mind*.

Now it might sound contradictory for Paul to tell the church to do something to make him happy as an introduction to humility and to not think of yourselves but of others.

Your right – it does sound like that at first blush.

But in this context, Paul is actually revealing the truth that there is a joy that is far richer, deeper, sweeter than any self-centered desire; it is the grace of Christ that turns a personal’s heart inside out so that his personal joy is now bound up in seeing his Christian friends grow more like Jesus Christ.^{xix}

Paul is saying, “This is what would just send my joy off the charts – for you to demonstrate the humility of God the Father, God the Son and God

the Holy Spirit in demonstrating their version of love, encouragement, fellowship and caring with all humility.”

Now don’t miss this. Paul’s under house arrest; he’s in chains, under constant guard, without any freedom of movement, isolated from his friends and misunderstood by the church in Rome – and here he says, “What would really make me so incredibly joyful would be for you to demonstrate the unity of humility.”^{xx}

I couldn’t help but wonder – how would we fill in this blank?

“What would really make my joy complete would be _____.”

What would you fill in to that blank?

“What would really make me incredibly happy in life is _____.”

Paul effectively says here, “What would top off my tank of joy isn’t getting out of house arrest – it isn’t getting all my friends back – it isn’t being vindicated before church leaders who are condemning me – given an award for serving Christ – no.

Paul says it would bring me incredible, fulfilling joy to see the church demonstrating humility toward one another.

This is the heart of the true shepherd. This is the passion of the true Christian.

This is the heartbeat of Christ.^{xxi}

This is the heartbeat of Christianity.

When Augustine the great theologian of the late fourth century was asked to list the three most central principles of the Christian life, he replied, “Number 1: Humility; Number 2: Humility; Number 3: Humility.”^{xxii}

This is the unmistakably distinctive virtue that is vanishing all around us . . . it’s time to bring it back . . . it’s time to demonstrate it to one another.

And the church is just the place to see it happen . . . first.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/15/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Adapted from John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Zondervan, 2014), p. 98

ⁱⁱ Adapted from David Brooks, *The Modesty Manifesto*, *The New York Times* (3-21-11) and “Study: Self-Images Often Erroneously Inflate,” *ABC News* (11/9/05)

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- iii Adapted from preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1999/April/5718.html
- iv Quoted in Warren W. Wiersbe, *Philippians: Be Joyful* (Victor Books, 1978), p. 50
- v Steven E. Runge, *Philippians: A Visual and Textual Guide* (Lexham Press, 2014), p. 39
- vi Runge, p. 40.
- vii G. Walter Hansen, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians* (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 106
- viii Ibid
- ix J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians* (Lamplighter Books, 1973), p. 57
- x Hansen, p. 106
- xi Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 549
- xii Hansen, p. 109
- xiii John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 104
- xiv Annie Johnson Flint, *He Giveth More Grace* 1941
- xv Hansen, p. 109
- xvi C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (HarperOne, reprint: 2008), p. 14
- xvii Hansen, p. 110
- xviii J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (IVP Academic, 1984), p. 104
- xix Dennis E. Johnson, *Philippians* (P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 104
- xx Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (Crossway Books, 2007), p. 76
- xxi Sam Gordon, *Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 72
- xxii Gordon, p. 76