

## WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD

### Cultivating Humility

**“God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble”**  
~ James 4:6 & 1 Peter 5:5 (citing Prov 3:34)

#### **Pride: The Root of Fallenness**

In Greek mythology, Icarus was the son of the master craftsman Daedalus, the Greek symbol of wisdom, knowledge, and power. Attempting to escape the island of Crete, Daedalus constructed wings from feathers and wax for the men to fly to their freedom. He warned his son: Do not fly too low to the water out of complacency, or the humidity will clog the feathers. But do not fly too high in the sky out of arrogance, or the sun will melt the wax. Icarus ignored his father’s counsel and in his own hubris flew high above the water. The sun melted the wax and the feathers let loose. Icarus’ wings dissolved and he plummeted to the sea and drowned.

The Bible itself is filled with countless historical examples of the arrogance of men and its disastrous outcome. While men like Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:29-33) and Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:21-23) stand out among the many, they illustrate in more dramatic fashion what is true of every unregenerate person. Apart from a supernatural transformation, hubris marks every human heart, and it alone is enough to plunge the sinner into the just waters of eternal condemnation. As the Apostle Paul states of the unbeliever, “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:18, citing Psalm 36:1).

But even spiritual rebirth does not eradicate pride one-and-for-all. Though pride’s tyrannical rule over the sinner is ended by the miracle of regeneration, it remains Enemy #1 for the believer. Jonathan Edwards observes this when he writes,

The first and worst cause of errors that abound in our day and age is spiritual pride. This is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of Christ. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit to darken the mind and mislead the judgment. Pride is the main handle by which he has hold of Christian persons and the chief source of all the mischief that he introduces to clog and hinder a work of God. Spiritual pride is the main spring or at least the main support of all other errors. Until this disease is cured, medicines are applied in vain to heal all other diseases. (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1.398)

Consequently, the need to mortify pride and cultivate humility is a primary focus in any discussion of wisdom. We certainly find that to be true in the book of Proverbs. The experience of any kind of success in this treacherous, hubris-filled world can only occur when the God-fearer actively engages in the pursuit of humility. A survey of Proverb’s content yields at least five important lessons regarding this pursuit.

**“Just as pride is the root of every evil, humility is the root of every virtue.”**

~ Stuart Scott, *The Exemplary Husband*, 185

#### **1. True humility grows only in the fear of the LORD.**

The book of Proverbs does not teach *moralism*—the belief that man can improve his moral condition by his own effort. Relying on his own strength, no man can cultivate true humility. From beginning to end, Proverbs emphasizes that the foundation for growth in wisdom—and humility in particular—is never found within oneself. To the contrary, it is only found in acknowledging and submitting to God’s Word.

- **1:7** – “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

- **3:7-8** – “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones.”
- **8:13** – “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I hate.”
- **13:13** – “The one who despises the word will be in debt to it, but the one who fears the commandment will be rewarded.”

True humility only grows in the soil of an unqualified submission to God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. Any profession of meekness made while still questioning the veracity or authority of God’s Word—in whole or in part—is nothing but cleverly disguised arrogance. Full-fledged surrender to God’s sovereignty and wisdom mediated through the Bible is where the pursuit of all true humility begins.

- **Isaiah 66:2** – “‘For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,’ declares the Lord. ‘But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.’”

**“A true disciple inquires not whether a fact is agreeable to his own reason, but whether it is in the book. His pride has yielded to the Divine testimony. Teacher, your pride is still unbroken. Break down your pride, and yield to the word of God.”**

~19<sup>th</sup> cent. Baptist Missionary, Adoniram Judson, to Burmese teaching seeking to follow Christ

## **2. True humility acknowledges one’s spiritual poverty.**

Sincere submission to and unreserved trust in God’s word inevitably leads to two conclusions: God is great, and I am not. As humility grows so does the conviction to *believe everything* God has said and *question everything* that arises from personal intuition. So many men are hindered on the path to humility by their habitual practice of walking according to their own understanding. As J. I. Packer states, “We can never distrust ourselves too much” (*Knowing God*, 238). This is crucial in the cultivation of humility.

**“There are two things that are suited to humble the soul of men, a due consideration of God, and then ourselves. Of God, in His greatness, glory, holiness, power, majesty and authority; ourselves, in our mean, abject and sinful condition.” ~ John Owen**

**“They that know God will be humble; they that know themselves cannot be proud.” ~ John Flavel**

- **3:5-8** – “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones.”

Humility will manifest itself in a persistent skepticism about the reliability of “our own understanding” and a relentless acknowledgement of our need for the counsel of others.

- **12:15** – “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.”
- **14:12** – “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”
- **26:12** – “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”
- **28:26** – “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered.”

Thus, acknowledging personal poverty means . . .

- Refusing to play the victim card.
- Rejecting the retreat into self-pity.

- Repelling the mentality of grievance and offendedness.
- Taking responsibility for failures.
- Believing you have received better than you deserve.
- Admitting that what you experience is from the hand of God and is what you need.

**“Meekness is essentially a true view of oneself . . . The man who is truly meek is the one who is truly amazed that that God and man can think of him as well as they do, and treat him as well as they do.”**

~ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1.68-69

**“A humble saint likes that condition which God sees best for him. He is content where God has him. A proud man complains that he has no more; a humble man wonders that he has so much.”**

~ Thomas Watson

### **3. True humility recognizes that honor comes as a consequence—not as an effect.**

Biblical wisdom upends the myth that honor or reward should come first, and then humility will develop naturally thereafter. In God’s universe, it the reverse:

- **15:33** – “The fear of the Lord is the instruction for wisdom, and before honor *comes* humility.”
- **18:12** – “Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, but humility *goes* before honor.”
- **22:4** – “The reward of humility *and* the fear of the Lord are riches, honor and life.”
- **29:23** – “A man’s pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor.”

This important truth is emphasized repeatedly in the New Testament as well: **Matthew 23:12; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6; James 4:6 / 1 Peter 5:5 (citing Prov 3:34)**. In fact, this truth was supremely demonstrated in the incarnation and mission of the Son of God: **Philippians 2:5-11**.

One of the most important life lessons for any man to learn is to live in submission to the truth that humility *must* come before honor or reward; the cross of suffering *must* come before the crown of glory. This is true wisdom—an important acknowledgement of the law of *cause-and-effect* that reflects the order of God Himself. Moreover, in embracing this truth, one must also recognize that the timing and scope of the *effect* of humility—the reward—is entirely in God’s hands. As the Apostle Peter states, it comes “at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:6).

Conversely, one of the greatest dangers for any man—and especially the young man—is to experience quick and easy success. In most cases, this is spiritual poison. Accomplishments gained without the investment of pain and effort feed the sinful flesh and train the man to expect it. This inevitably leads to a shocking downfall and disqualification. (It is for this reason that the Apostle Paul warns against giving a young convert—no matter how gifted—the authority of an elder: “so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil,” – 1 Timothy 3:6).

### **4. True humility leaves it to others to promote one’s accomplishments.**

Humility grows only with the refusal to make much of one’s own accomplishments and status. This is a truth that is utterly foreign to a culture as narcissistic as ours. For many, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook exist for the primary purpose of *self-promotion*—the never ending quest to garner more and more “likes,” increase admiration in the eyes of followers, and stoke envy on the part of critics.

**“The fear of the Lord is not the spirit of our times. Self-esteem [pride] is the spirit of our times.”**

~ Ortlund, *Proverbs: Wisdom that Works*, 142

- **25:6-7** – “Do not claim honor in the presence of the king, and do not stand in the place of great men; for it is better that it be said to you, ‘Come up here,’ than for you to be placed lower in the presence of the prince, whom your eyes have seen.”
- **25:27** – “It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glory to search out one’s own glory.”
- **27:1-2** – “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth. Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.”
- **27:21** – “The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold, and each *is tested* by the praise accorded him.”

This leads to two implications: (1) While we are not to conceal but to confess our *faults* to one another (28:13), the reverse is true for our *feats*. (2) While we are not to spread but to cover the *faults* of another (11:13), the reverse is true of their *feats*.

Thus, mortifying self-promotion means . . .

Refusing the humblebrag.

Practicing self-forgetfulness.

Being content with secrecy regarding your own charity and sacrifice (see Matt 6:4, 6, 18).

Learning to rejoice sincerely in the accomplishments of others (not flattery, but real gladness).

Trusting in the Lord’s promise to never forget what is done for His glory (see 1 Cor 15:58).

**“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays . . . . Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seeks to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.” ~ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 128**

## **5. True humility escapes the righteous judgment of God.**

Finally, wisdom teaches that cultivating humility will put you on a path that takes you *away from* the condemnation of God:

- **3:34; 6:16-17; 8:13; 15:25; 16:5, 18-19**

## **For Further Reflection**

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- When was the last time you specifically prayed that God would make you humble? Are you ready for the Lord to answer that prayer using whatever means He sovereignly and wisely uses?
- Humility can grow only within the soil of a full-fledged embrace of the veracity and authority of God’s Word. Are there texts in the Bible about which you are skeptical, or which you know are true but have still refused to obey? What does wisdom call you to do?
- What are several things you must do to live out your belief in your personal deficiencies? How will acknowledging these inadequacies this help you grow in humility?
- It has been said that pride is always expressed in relation to someone else. Who are the people with whom you compare yourself most often? Why? In order to mortify pride and cultivate humility, how should you be thinking in relation to these people?

**Recommended reading:** Jerry Bridges, *The Blessing of Humility*, NavPress, 2016; Stuart Scott, *From Pride to Humility*, Focus Publishing, 2002.

**This Week’s Audio & Notes:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** Jan 13 – Esteeming Work, Pt 1