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The Essential Qualities of Humility

by Dr. Stanley D. Toussaint

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Dr. Stanley D. Toussaint faithfully taught the New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary for 47 years and pastored for more than 20 years. A pastor-teacher who is committed to expository preaching, Dr. Toussaint enjoys both roles. Dr. Toussaint is an editor, author, teacher, and conference speaker who has taught not only at the Seminary but also in Christian schools in the Middle East, Australia, and the Far East. He also has ministered in the pulpit literally around the world. Known as one of the world’s leading authorities on the New Testament, Dr. Toussaint received a B.A. degree from Augsburg College in 1951 and holds both the Th.M. (1955) and Th.D. (1957) degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary.

In his last chapel message before his retirement from Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr. Stanley D. Toussaint said that bringing a message on humility is very, very difficult because it can be taken the wrong way—as if the speaker is saying he has already arrived when it comes to practicing true humility. Dr. Toussaint went on to say, “We’ve all heard that old joke about the person who wrote a book, put a full-page picture of himself on the cover, and titled it Humility and How I Obtained It. That’s not where I am. The last thing I want is to give the impression that I’ve attained humility.”

Despite his hesitations, however, we believe that Dr. Toussaint is indeed the right person to speak on this timely subject, which is why we are delighted to share his powerful message with you.
When it comes to the subject of humility, I feel like the apostle Paul, who said, “Not that I have already obtained [it] . . . but I press on” (Phil. 3:12). This is one reason why it is hard to talk about humility. It’s also hard to explain what real humility is, so I’d like to look at it under the following three headings.

**Humility Before God**

Humility before God is where we need to begin, and I can’t think of a better passage to use here than Matthew 5:3, where the Lord says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This is the first of the Beatitudes in Jesus’ well-known Sermon on the Mount.

The theme of this famous sermon is genuine righteousness, which is for Jesus’ disciples. I call it an “interim ethic,” meaning it’s an ethic until the kingdom comes. The disciples were expecting the kingdom to come then, but Jesus said, “Here is how I want you to live in the interim until the kingdom does come.” The kingdom still hasn’t come, so this is an ethic that still relates to us as Jesus’ disciples today. And He begins by talking about the poor in spirit.

All of the Beatitudes have three parts. First, there is a pronouncement of blessing; second is a character qualification; and third, there’s a description of the kingdom. Let’s apply this formula to Matthew 5:3. The first word is “blessed.” It’s a Greek word that some translate, “All the happiness of,” and then say, “This is a description of a happy life. This is how you have a happy life.”

That’s possible, but this word was also used for congratulations. So Jesus was saying, “Congratulations to the poor in spirit. Congratulations to those who mourn. Congratulations to the meek.” Why? Because these are the ones who are going to go into the kingdom. It’s a description of the kingdom.

In between this pronouncement of blessing and a description of the kingdom in verse 3 is the character qualification “the poor in spirit.” The word for “poor” describes somebody who has nothing. It’s used, for instance, in the wonderful story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. In verse 20, the *New International Version* calls Lazarus a “beggar,” which is exactly the picture of this word. Interestingly, the same word is used of Christ in 2 Corinthians 8:9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

**Seeing Ourselves Before God**

So in Matthew 5:3 Jesus was describing a person who is a beggar in spirit. What does that mean? It’s how we see ourselves before God. You have nothing, I have nothing when we come to stand before God. There’s no better illustration of this than Isaiah 6, when the prophet Isaiah saw God in all of His glory and cried out, “Woe to me! . . . I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (v. 5). That’s poverty of spirit.

Or consider Job, the best man God had on planet Earth. Can you imagine that? For God to say, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him” (Job 1:8). But you know how Job’s story went. God permitted Satan to get to Job, and all the way through the book Job was saying, “If I could just have access to God, if I could just talk to God, I know He’d hear my case.”

But when it was all over, Job stood before God and all he could say was, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes...
have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5–6). Job was a beggar, a pauper, in spirit. That’s humility before God.

**Humility Before People**

The apostle Peter wrote: “Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’ ” (1 Pet. 5:5). The humility Peter calls for is toward believers, toward other people. The word translated “clothe” is used only here in all of the New Testament. It has the idea of tying a knot. It refers to a garment that's put on by tying a knot.

I can’t help but think of John 13, in the Upper Room, as Jesus arose from the table and wrapped a towel around Himself. How do you affix a towel? You tie it on. Peter is clearly looking back to that moment at the Last Supper when Christ tied a towel around Himself so He could wash the disciples' feet. Jesus clothed Himself with humility toward His disciples.

How do you clothe yourself with humility toward others? By humbly serving them, by offering yourself as a living sacrifice in service. Paul described it this way: “I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1). That's your body, then verse 2 deals with your mind: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

It’s very instructive that in light of this call to service, Romans 12:3 says, “I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” Then Paul goes on to talk about spiritual gifts, which are to be exercised in humility. Why?

Because the gifts we have are from God to use in serving others, not to exalt ourselves.

John the Baptist is a great illustration of this principle. John said that he was not fit to unite the Lord's sandals (Matt. 3:11; John 1:27). Then in John 1, the Jewish religious authorities sent out a delegation to find out who John was. He readily confessed that he was not the Messiah. But notice in this chapter that John did not have that false humility that says, “Oh, I’m nothing and I can’t do anything.”

No, when the authorities asked John what they should say to the ones who sent them, he replied in verse 23 that his ministry was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3, “A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare. . . .’ ” Again, this is true humility before people. John didn’t elevate himself above what he ought to be. He recognized that God had given him a job to do, and he accepted it humbly.

**Humility Versus Pride**

We dare not become proud about the spiritual gifts God has given us. I can say without reservation or exception that every single good thing we have is a gift from God. A student here at Dallas Theological Seminary or some other school could say, “Wait a minute. I was the valedictorian of my class.” Well, who gave that person the intellectual ability to achieve that recognition?

Another might say, “Hold on. I have worked very hard to put myself through school.” But who gave you the opportunity to study? Who provided the funds and the strength to work those jobs that met your needs? They’re all gifts. James wrote: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from
the Father of the heavenly lights” (James 1:17).

Rather than being proud of our gifts and our abilities, let’s use them to minister to one another as servants in humility. That’s the point: we are all servants. I appreciate the fact that the administration, faculty, and staff here at DTS understand that we are here to serve the students and each other as we all serve the Lord. Service is our main responsibility.

So if you really want to become a servant, become a slave. If you want to be first, become last. We are training men and women at the Seminary to be servants and leaders—but first of all, to be servants.

A Warning for Us All

Now, a word of warning in regard to humility. This warning is found in 1 Corinthians 8:1, where Paul writes, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” There’s the warning. Paul was writing in regard to food sacrificed to idols, and he proceeded in this chapter to answer the Corinthians’ question about this issue. But first, he wanted them to realize that knowledge alone on the subject, even the right knowledge, was not enough.

Knowledge is the basic coin of the realm at Dallas Theological Seminary. Our students are here to gain knowledge about God’s Word and about ministry. But knowledge can be dangerous because we may begin to think that we actually know something! By that I mean, whenever someone becomes well trained in a field of knowledge, people begin looking to that person for answers. That can be pretty heady, and if we’re not careful, we may begin to believe our own press clippings, as my dear late friend and former colleague Dr. Howard Hendricks used to warn his students.

The same thing can happen in your world. But wherever we are serving God, it’s absolute folly to think we know it all. Knowledge by itself without love, which requires humility, puffs up. For those who have a tendency to think they know something, 1 Corinthians 8:2 is the antidote: “The man who thinks he knows something. . . .” Another way to translate that is, “A man who supposes he knows something.” It’s just a supposition. That means if we begin to think we really know our subject, we don’t.

The Humility of Knowledge

Whenever we have chapel services at the Seminary, the platform is filled with experts. I mean this in the right sense, the purest sense. The men and women who sit in those chairs at Chafer Chapel are experts in all different fields—Old Testament, New Testament, Bible, theology, church history, Christian education, missions, youth work, women’s ministries, and whatever other area you can name. They’re experts, yet I guarantee you that every one of them will say, “There is so much I don’t know.”

In fact, I think to a person, our faculty members would confess to our students, “If you knew how much I don’t know about my field, you’d be frightened.” There was laughter when I said that in my chapel message, and I did say it with a smile. But there’s a lot of truth in it.

Sir Isaac Newton was a great student of the universe, a philosopher, and a mathematician, the genius who developed mathematics and formulas that are still used in astrophysics today. But Newton said of himself, “I’m like a child, playing by the seashore, picking up a pebble here and a pebble there while the ocean rolls in front of me.”
Perhaps the greatest inventor in American history was Thomas Edison, who once said, “We don’t know one millionth of one percent about anything.” Newton and Edison understood that there is an entire ocean of truth out there, and the best we can do is dabble in it at the shore. So it’s foolish to become puffed up with pride over our knowledge. Knowledge puffs up.

It’s true to recognize how little we really know. Don’t get me wrong; information is important. I don’t want to put anything down. Knowledge is extremely important. Hosea said, “My people perish for lack of knowledge” (see Hosea 4:6). Malachi said, “A priest’s lips should keep knowledge” (see Malachi 2:7). John says in 1 John, “I am writing these things to you that you may know.”

So here are the three steps of humility: 1. Before God. “Oh, God, I’m nothing. I’m a sinner. I’m undone.” 2. Before people. “Oh, God has given me some opportunities, some abilities, some gifts, not for my glory, not so that I might magnify myself, but that I might serve the body of Christ.” 3. A warning. Get knowledge, but don’t be puffed up.

John Trapp was a great Puritan divine who made a statement that has haunted me for years. It just pursues me like my shadow. Here’s what he said: “Those who know God will be humble. Those who know themselves cannot be proud.” Let’s think about that.
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