

Christian Character - Humility - Part 2

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 May 2025

Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0:00] Brilliant. Let me pray for us and then we'll come and have a look at God's word together. Let's pray. Father, thank you that we're not here just to share our good ideas with each other, but that we get to listen to what you say in your word.

And we pray now as we do the slightly more tricky task of jumping around the Bible to see what it says on a theme, that you might help us to think carefully about your word. And Lord, we pray that you might bless our time together for our good and for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So if you were with us last week, you might remember that we said humility, which we've been looking at last week and this week, is the root of the graces of the Christian life.

In other words, the good fruits of the Christian life come from humility. So love, joy, peace, patience, kindness have their root in the soil of humility.

And we spoke a little bit last week about a guy called Andy Murray or Andrew Murray, not the tennis player, but the theologian from last century that said the lack of humility is a sufficient explanation for every defect and failure.

[1:15] See, I think I've put that quote back on your handout. Humility is the only soil in which the graces root. The lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure. Humility is not so much a grace or a virtue along with the others.

It is the root of all because it alone takes the right attitude before God and allows him as God to do all. Now, that was last week. This week, I want us to think about how we might define humility, exactly what it is.

What is Christian or Bible humility and how does that relate to both sin and salvation, our identity as sinners and the work of Christ in salvation?

Now, I think defining humility is perhaps slightly harder than it might first seem. So let me just suggest an obvious thing. Firstly, that humility is the opposite of pride, by which I mean that if humility is the root of the graces of the Christian life, that is because pride, its opposite, is really at the heart of what sin is.

All sin essentially is the self-centered, selfish wickedness. It's pride. Adam and Eve in the garden are not just breaking the law or the rule that God has given them.

[2:32] They are grasping after God's status for themselves. If we eat this, we will be like God. That's the heart of sin, isn't it? It's pride is in the driving seat. So while God says and God's law says God is God and we are not, pride says I can be my own God.

I can go my own way. I can do my own thing, which is the lie of sin. So pride's evil twin is unbelief, right?

Pride is the heart of unbelief, which means as the opposite of pride, humility is really a twin with faith. Because faith is, Christian faith is the action of self-emptying.

It's the empty hand which takes hold of what God offers in the gospel. You know, faith is not a work that we do, which merits God's saving graces.

Faith is an empty hand. It's the self-empty person reaching out and receiving what God has given with no confidence in themselves at all and all their confidence in Christ.

[3:40] Faith is humility in action. Now, that's not to say that every person who you think of as humble is necessarily a Christian. There is a common grace humility that is spread around the world. But this uniquely Christian kind of humility sees not just human weakness in a general sense, but sees itself as sinfully weak and in need of a salvation which is beyond its own grasp, recognizing its emptiness, throwing itself on Christ for salvation.

Now, what I want to try and do is build that picture up using various different passages of the Bible. And to save us spending ages jumping around the Bible, I've printed out the cross-references on

your handouts.

And to try and, in a vague attempt to try and make this memorable, I've also done it as three statements that a humble Christian says. Now, obviously a humble Christian would say more than these three things.

It doesn't just say that you can only say three things if you're a humble Christian. But these are three statements at the heart of Christian humility. So let's take them each in turn. The first one is this.

A humble Christian says, it's not just that I have sinned. I am a sinner. I am a sinner. Now, I think this is surprising, but let's have a look through these New Testament references.

[4 : 50] The first one is in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 9 to 10. Then, the Apostle Paul writes, For I am the least of the apostles, and do not even deserve to be called an apostle.

I am literally unworthy, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

Paul is really clear, isn't he, here, about his status as unworthy. I do not even deserve. I am the least amongst the apostles, because I persecuted the church.

I rounded them up, handed them over to the authorities for persecution and even execution. Now, he's not still doing that, right? So he has repented of that, and is no longer doing that.

Yet still, he identifies himself with it, and says that he is the least among the apostles because of it. It's a similar idea in Ephesians chapter 3, verse 8, where Paul talks about his ministry like this.

[5 : 52] He says, Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given to me to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.

Now, you might just say, oh, Paul's just overstating it for effect, but I don't think he is. As far as he is concerned, he is the most undeserving of all of God's people. Right?

Again, while Paul isn't referencing any particular kind of sin, any action, still he has this status in mind of being the least. The least who is given the task of preaching. I think probably 1 Timothy 1.15 puts it really clearly, doesn't it?

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, which is written up behind me, of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason, I was shown mercy, so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example to those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

Now, to the king, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. Paul captures this truth about humility, that he is the foremost among sinners, or the worst of sinners.

[7 : 06] And the worst, so that his ministry might be able to point people to the possibility of salvation. If Jesus can save someone like Paul, he can save someone like you, or someone like me, anyone else.

Now, again, notice, Paul isn't confessing any particular individual sin. He is not saying that he is the foremost sinner because of any particular weakness, or bad habit, or pattern of behavior now, right?

He's not saying, I am the worst of sinners because I'm doing this today or tomorrow. And that doesn't mean he's not guilty of ongoing sins. Of course, he is. Rather, the point is that beyond just that, Paul recognizes himself, in himself, I am a sinner.

Now, it's not the only thing that is true of Paul. We'll talk more about that in a moment. But still, somehow, in his Christian life, as he lives it and grows in it, he doesn't shake this understanding of himself.

But left to himself, he's a rebel against God, undeserving of salvation. Someone in whom nothing worthy of saving could be found. Now, notice with me, this is very different from Paul saying, I get a few things wrong, or I've done a few things wrong.

[8 : 16] You know, everyone will be or should be willing to admit that they've got things wrong, sometimes even deliberately, but it's not that, is it? Rather, this is a different kind of humility. It's not humility rooted in guilt for a particular sin.

It's really an understanding of who he is. I am, before God, someone who is unworthy of his grace and mercy. The point seems to be that for Paul to properly appreciate God's saving grace and to understand that saving love, Paul has to keep on remembering that there is nothing in him that deserved it.

That he was dead in his sin when Christ saved him. And so the ongoing process of his growth and development as a Christian is to hold on to and even grow in that self-understanding. I don't know if this illustration actually works perfectly, but let me give you it. Just say that it's a bit of a break. My granddad, who was Thomas Jackson Palferman, went down the pit as a coal miner aged 14.

1926, along with a whole load of others his own age, he spent day after day crawling around digging out coal. And to the day my granddad died, he carried around in his wallet his first wage slip, just so that he could prove to you that that was his job.

[9 : 39] He never wanted you to forget where he was from and how little he got for it and how far he'd come. Now, it's a dumb example, isn't it? Because it breaks down very quickly. But in a sense, this is it, isn't it?

Paul never wants to forget who he is and where he comes from. His identity is that he is a sinner. It's never far away from Paul's thoughts. Because appreciating this about himself makes God's grace all the more amazing.

It's as he drills down into this kind of I'm a sinner humility that he goes up in grace and joy because he realized that God has saved him. He loves people like me, even me.

And if you think about it, this will still be the case in eternity after we've stopped sinning. The song of heaven is the song of the blood of the lamb, right? The one who gave his life.

Do you think we'll be singing that going, well, I wonder why he did that? Why did Jesus die? I don't know. I haven't done anything wrong with you. I don't know. Of course, we all know ourselves, won't we? That we are the redeemed.

[10 : 37] We're the rescued. We're the ones who didn't deserve it. But Christ died for us and saved us. That's humble, sinless sinners enjoying eternity with their saviour.

That will be it. Now, just with the person next to you for a minute, why do we find this identity difficult to take on? What is it about that that we find difficult to think of ourselves in the same category that Paul thinks of himself?

Have a think about that for a moment. And then we'll move on to the second one. Anyone want to help us out? Yeah.

yeah yeah I think inside of each of us is deeply planted this idea that God saves the deserving and not the undeserving and so that the more I understand my undeservingness the lesser confidence I'll have that God saved me but when I read the Bible it's the opposite isn't it God saves the undeserving so the more I understand myself to be undeserving the more I have confidence that Christ can save people like me so Christian assurance is not about am I you know am I working and living in such a way that I demonstrate myself to be a person that God saves it's it's more do I realize that Jesus saves people like me that he's a savior for people like me and the more I see that the more I yeah go on Andrew

I think I see that based on where I was saved right you know yes yes but then times come when I know got it wrong you know I'm not even up to the standard that I should be so I'm yes but of course I think the inherent nature we're in here as a human being I probably do have times where I visit yeah yeah yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes

[14 : 05] It's not that I can't do anything. I just can't do what really matters, right? Just consider a couple of passages with me. Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3.

For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

And to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Do you see here that there's an impossibility without divine help for us to really grasp what needs to be grasped? Yeah, so that you may know what is unknowable.

[15 : 18] You need divine help. It is not possible for the Ephesians to grasp the depth of love that God has for them. They are incapable of grasping what needs to be grasped.

So their Christian lives, if they're to be fruitful, if they're to be lived with joy, then they're going to need the Lord's help. I'm sorry, Anthony.

Shh, Anthony. Thank you. Right. Sometimes your train of thought just totally disappears, doesn't it? Right. So Paul prays that God, by his spirit, might do for them what they cannot do, abundantly more than anything they ask or imagine.

So you think about it like that. If you really want to grow as a Christian, right, if you really want to grow in the Christian life, what Paul is saying to you, you need to admit there is nothing that you are able to do to do that.

Right. So if you want to get a good job, right, what are you going to do? Are you going to work hard? Are you going to study hard? Are you going to get a good night's sleep before your exam tomorrow? All that kind of thing.

[16:22] Right. That's what you're going to do. If you want a good marriage, what are you going to do? Well, you spend time together. You work hard at communicating. If you want to be good in the workplace, then you're going to read some books and train up and ask for help and go on courses.

All those things will help you. But you can't just apply the same thinking to the Christian life. We can study. And it's important, isn't it? There are means that the Lord uses. But fundamentally, Christian growth is accepting that I am unable to do that on my own.

All's prayer shows you that the humbling fact at the heart of Christian growth is that I can't do it on my own. I need the Lord to shape and mold me. So if I want to grow as a Christian, I have to get on my knees and say with all sincerity, I can't do this, Lord, I don't have access to my heart to change it.

Heart transformation comes by the work of the Spirit. And for the work of the Spirit to take place, we need to drain ourselves of self-reliance and self-importance. Or we need to be humble.

This is one of the challenges, isn't it, in church life. It's in pastoral ministry. That as you look at one another and you seek one another's Christian growth, you can't do it, can you?

[17:34] We long for one another to grow in Christlikeness, but we don't have the capacity to reach into each other's hearts and transform one another. Actually, we need the Lord to do it. To grasp the love of God, God needs to do it.

We can't nag each other into doing it. I think Titus chapter 2 puts it really well, doesn't it? So Titus 2, it's on your handout. For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

It, as in the grace of God, teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are of his very own, eager to do what is good.

It's full of action, isn't it? Things that we're doing, training, renouncing, zeal for good works, but where do they come from? Well, they come from the grace of God that has appeared. How does that work? Well, the grace of God is about the Son of God emptying himself to redeem us and purchase us as his own people.

In other words, it's more, the more you recognize your unworthiness and your helplessness, that you're trained to be useful as a Christian. Which is really counterintuitive, isn't it?

[18:53] The more I know that I don't know, the more useful I will be to the Lord. I'll be more zealous. Okay, if that's true and that's right, the person next to you, what then does progress in the Christian life look like?

What do you think progress in the Christian life looks like? If you were to say, take a snapshot today as a Christian and take a snapshot in a year's time, what's progress going to look like for you as a Christian?

What do you think, given what we've seen? Okay, sorry to interrupt your conversations. What do you think progress looks like in the Christian life?

What did you say, Grace, because it sounded like it was good. Okay. Yes, increased dependence on the Lord.

Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

[20:13] That actually being helped to understand what you're doing wrong is helpful because it helps you to turn to the Lord to help you do it better. Yeah. Yeah. And if we're humble, and we're going to come on to this about Christ being our treasure, then criticism can never really erode the thing that's really important to us, can it?

It's not important to me that you think I'm brilliant. My treasure is Jesus. And so please tell me where I'm not brilliant because I need to learn. Yeah. Anything else?

I think this is wonderfully liberating, right, for somebody, you know, in pastoral ministry.

For you to grow as a Christian, I just need to expose you over and over again to the gospel of grace, right? I don't need to come up with some kind of magic trick to help you. I'm actually just constantly exposing you to the gospel of grace, to keep showing you that you can't rely on yourself, but you can rely on Christ, that you're a sinner, but he loves to save sinners.

And you can be secure in him. That will grow you as a Christian in whatever area you find yourself. You know, we're all in complex different situations, aren't we? But that will grow us as Christians. Brilliant.

[21 : 30] So don't ever come to church and go, well, I've heard this before, right? That's the point, right? You've heard it before. We need to hear it again. Great. Okay, the final thing. It's not just that Jesus is my savior.

He is my everything. One passage, final passage from Philippians 3. Paul writes, watch out for those dogs, those evil doers, those mutilators of the flesh.

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh, though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law of Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

[22 : 39] When I copy and paste the passages out of the Bible, it gives me the American version, I'm sorry. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

You're sort of given a window, aren't you, here into Paul's self-counseling session. And he is weighing up the relative worth of things that he has. And on the one hand, he has this mental list of all the good things that he has in himself, things that he can be proud of, good things, most of them, except for persecuting the church.

And on the other hand, he has Christ. Then he makes this extraordinary statement that not only are those things not reliable for his salvation, you would expect him to say that, wouldn't you?

You would expect him to say, I can't rely on my good works for my salvation, I can only rely on Christ. He does say that, but then he goes further than that. He says, doesn't he, I consider all things to be garbage, rubbish, dung, literally, compared to knowing Christ.

[23 : 53] Compared to the treasure that I have in Christ Jesus, nothing is of value to me. That's an incredible statement, isn't it? Jesus is not just more reliable, but more precious than anything else that he has.

Jesus Christ is of supreme value. Anything that he has earned himself, done himself, achieved himself, thought himself, none of that has any value compared to the surpassing glory of belonging to Jesus, being saved by him and being his.

Now, just put this together with me for a moment as we finish. And we see this is the great joy of humility, isn't it? Because it's a joy that can't be robbed from you. Humility brings you a joy that can't be stolen by your sin or killed off by your weakness.

Because in your weakness and your sin, it is the joy of knowing Christ, isn't it? He is your treasure. That's why being humble or even being humbled, which can be really painful, can't it?

Is itself a road to joy and glory that you'd not know before. To the extent to which we know that we have nothing of value or treasure outside of Christ.

[25 : 05] That's the value to which we actually are able to live joyfully for him. Let me finish with an Andy Murray quote for you. Here we go. Let us choose to be weak, to be low, to be nothing.

Let humility be to us joy and gladness. Let us gladly glory and take pleasure in weakness, in all that can humble us and keep us low.

Then the power of Christ will rest upon us. Christ humbled himself. Therefore God exalted him.

Christ will humble us and keep us humble. Let us heartily consent.

Let us trustfully and joyfully accept all that humbles. Then the power of Christ will rest upon us. We shall find that the deepest humility is the secret of the truest happiness, of a joy that nothing can destroy.

Let me pray and ask that it would be true for us. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we want to pray and say these statements that we're not just people who've done stuff wrong.

[26 : 15] We are sinners. We are sinners. But we are sinners saved by grace. Who you've loved in the Lord Jesus and given him for us.

And we know that we can't do anything that really matters in our own strength. We can't grow as a Christian. We can't even grasp your love for us. So we pray that by your spirit you might be at work in us.

We want to thank you for the great treasure that is the Lord Jesus Christ and that he is ours and we are his. That we are in him. And we pray that treasuring Christ like that would bring us deep joy.

Even in humbling circumstances. So Lord, we want to pray. Acknowledging our weakness but knowing that actually it is in our weakness that you meet us with the strength of the Lord Jesus.

So we pray in glory in his name. Amen. Amen.