

Christian Character - Humility - Part 1

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- [0 : 0 0] So we're looking this evening in the first of two parts on humility. So over the next few months, we're going to be looking at different aspects of Christian character.
- And we are starting with humility. And we're starting there for a reason. And we're going to spend two weeks there for a reason as well. And that is, I think, because of the central importance of humility and how it relates to Christian character in general.
- There was a guy called Andrew Murray, not Andy Murray, the tennis player, but Andrew Murray, the theologian. He was writing at the turn of the 20th century on a little book called Humility.
- It's a real gem of a book. And he says this about humility. And you kind of have to get your way into thinking the kind of way these guys write. OK, so it might take a little bit of time, but we've got a few quotes from Andrew Murray this evening.
- So you will get into it by the end of the evening. He says this. Humility is the only soil in which the grace is root. The lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure.
- [1 : 0 9] Humility is not so much a grace or 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 might not be the kind of language that we might use. But his point is that humility is where everything else about Christian character grows out of.
- Humility is so central to our Christian lives that it is the grounds on which everything else grows. And saying as well that everything that we don't do right is coming essentially from pride.
- Now, maybe you think he's overstating it, but let me just try and prove it to you briefly just by the sheer weight of the topic in the Bible. My concordance tells me that the word humble appears in the Bible 2,341 times.
- On top of that, you could add all the condemnations of pride and you could add the words like meek or lowly. And what you find is that humility is a massive theme. Let me just track through with a few passages.
- [2 : 2 2] I'm not going to turn to them, but hopefully they'll ring a bell. But humility or learning humility is given by God as the reason for the wilderness journey of the people of Israel.
- In other words, God thought it so important that it worth 40 years wandering in the desert just to teach it. In 2 Samuel 22, verse 28, I think it's wrong on your handout.
- It's actually 28 or 26. David summarizes his experience of the Lord as being the one who saves the humble and condemns the proud. In other words, humility is the outstanding marker of the people that God saves.
- It is the thing that God is looking for. It's a constant theme in Kings and Chronicles as kings refuse humbling from the hand of the Lord or less frequently do humble themselves before the Lord, like Hezekiah.

It's the rise and the fall of the nations as they variously recognize and refuse to recognize who they are before God. Psalms alone speak of humility or better sing of humility regularly.

- [3 : 25] Psalm 25, verse 9, we're told that God, He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble His way. Towards the end of the Old Testament, the great intellect Daniel, who has risen to significant power in the nation of Babylon, is commended not for his status or his influence or even the great achievements of his life, but is commended for his humility.

Micah tells us famously that humility is what God requires from His people. If you jump into the New Testament, we're told that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was humble in Luke 1, 48.

We're told by Jesus that everyone who exalts himself, they will be humbled. He says the same thing three times. Then in Matthew's Gospel, we're told that it is humble, childlike faith which saves.

James 4, verse 6, riffs off the Old Testament and Psalms saying again that God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud. And then in 1 Peter 5, you get this great verse, humble yourselves therefore under God's mighty hand that He may lift you up in due time.

Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. You know those things go together, don't they? Humbling yourselves under the mighty hand of God is casting all your anxiety on Him.

- [4 : 42] It is handing it over to Him humbly before Him. And on top of all of that, and maybe most significantly of all, we are told over and over about the humility of Christ, that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

God the Eternal Son, leaving the glories of heaven, revealing Himself in what is by definition humility, stooping even to die on a cross, not for His own sin but for the sin of others.

Humbling Himself, becoming obedient to death, even the death on a cross. Now I'll stop there, but hopefully that's enough to persuade you that humility is important, that it is the root of the graces, as Murray puts it at the beginning.

Now given its significance in the Bible, Murray also has something else important to say. This is what comes next in his book. He says, The call to humility has been too little regarded in the church because its true nature and importance has been too little apprehended.

That's a better way of saying everyone's too stupid to realize how important humility is, right? Now I wonder whether you agree with him. So I want you just with the person next to you to discuss, do you agree that humility has been little regarded in the church?

- [5 : 56] Is humility something you've heard about often? Do you think it's well understood? Do you think it is preached about much? Do you read about it much? That kind of thing.

Talk to the person next to you just for a couple of minutes, and then we'll bring our answers back together. Go for it. Does anyone want to share their answers? What do we think? Important topic?

Okay. Okay. One that we're familiar with. We've talked often about this at church. What do you think?

You're all too humble to offer an answer, aren't you? This is the truth. Sorry? Yeah. Yes.

Let this mind be yours, which is also in Christ Jesus, you being in very nature God. Yeah. We're often going on about that. It's kind of so fundamental to Christian life, how you relate to a child, how you relate to God, that you can't overstate it, and you can't preach it too much.

[7 : 15] Yeah. And so, as you pointed out, by the beginning, it runs through Scripture so much. Yeah. Yeah. You can't preach it too much.

I think the problem we have is not understanding it. Yeah. Yeah. It's not the sort of cognitive understanding of it, it's the putting it into practice.

If I was to ask you how justification connects with sanctification, what would you say?

So, justification is the idea that God declares us not guilty through Christ's work on the cross. Sanctification is about us being made holy by God.

Do we understand how those two things connect together? Okay. Christians often think that God saves them by the blood of Jesus on their behalf.

[8 : 23] We are covered with the righteousness of Christ. We're justified by Jesus. And then think, but I grow as a Christian by my works and by my efforts. Right? And so, therefore, if I'm growing as a Christian and doing quite well, it's because I'm working quite well and I should be quite proud of that.

And so, we don't grow in humility. We sort of grow in self-confidence, pride. But actually, the Bible says those two things go together. Okay? So, our justification and our sanctification go together.

They are distinct from one another, but you can't separate them apart because they come together. So, we are declared righteous in the Lord Jesus and we are made holy by the Holy Spirit.

And the growth in holiness as a Christian is becoming who I already am in Christ. It's the kind of taking on who I am as my identity in Christ.

It's becoming who I will be or who I already am in Christ. And so, both of those things are rooted in the work of Christ. So, both of them are humbling, right?

[9 : 28] Because to be justified by faith in Jesus is to declare I have nothing of my own to offer to my salvation. I am trusting and relying on Christ alone. To grow in sanctification is to say all I can do is become the person that God has already made me to be.

And so, it's humbling, right? And so, because those things are linked together, being humble is right at the heart of the Christian life. And so, growing in humility is growing as a Christian.

Now, generalizations aren't always helpful, but I do think this one is helpful. It belongs to Andrew Murray anyway, not me. He says that basically, the Bible gives you three reasons to be humble.

Firstly, he says that you should be humble because we are creatures who did not create ourselves, so therefore we owe everything of our existence to God himself. And secondly, we should be humble because we are sinners.

We are people who have rebelled against God and we've gone our own way. And thirdly, we should be humble because we are recipients of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, we are made, we're not our own, we're sinners, we're rebels, and we're saved even though we're undeserving.

[10 : 42] And all those three things are humbling. What I want to try and do is take creation tonight and then take sin and salvation next Sunday evening if I can. So here's the question for us this evening.

What does it mean to be humble as creatures? Joe, just get yourself a chair. That's fine. You stacked all the chairs this morning, Joe, so you can unstack a chair for yourself. That's right.

In other words, what is it about just being created outside of any sin or grace that means humility is right for us. And to consider that, I want us to look at Revelation 4. I think, is it on your handout?

Revelation 4? Great. Let me read it to you. After this, I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven.

And the voice I had first heard speaking to me, like a trumpet, said, come up here and I will show you what must take place after this. At once, I was in the spirit.

[11 : 43] And there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby, a rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.

Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.

Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass clear as crystal. In the centre around the throne were four living creatures and they were covered with eyes in front and in back.

The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings.

[12 : 47] Day and night they never stopped saying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come. Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever, they lay their crowns before the throne and say, you are worthy, O Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.

Now, we're not going to go through all of that in extreme detail, but verse four tells you, doesn't it, that there are twenty-four elders around the throne, telling us that they're clothed in white garments with golden crowns on their head.

Exactly who they are is not super clear. Theologians have taken lots of different guesses, twenty-four heavenly priests following the twenty-four high priests of the Old Testament, or twelve Old Testament tribes plus twelve apostles, or something else relating to the significance of the white robes in pagan culture.

I don't think that's probably right. But which exactly is, we're not sure. But I'm not actually thinking that's the important point of the verses, because for the purposes of the passage, who the elders are is not significant.

It's because of not who they are, but because of what they're doing, right? You have a look at the passage. Notice in verse eight, the four living creatures, the lion, the ox, the man, and the eagle, representatives of the creation, I think the four corners of the earth, are all caught up in this perpetual song about the holiness of God.

[14 : 32] Holy, holy, holy, holy, they sing. Three times holy, set apart special difference. And the song of the four living creatures is then the trigger for the action of the 24 elders, who on hearing this song, fall down before the throne of God, worshipping him in the song of verse 11, worthy of you, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

But notice what they do as they worship. What are they doing as they worship? What are they saying? They fall down before the throne and they cast their crowns before the throne.

Do you see this? Singing of the worthiness of the creator, or to put it in the language of our topic this evening, recognising the creatureliness is accompanied by the removal of the crown.

This is the word Stephanos in the Greek from which Stephen comes, right? This is the crown, not of royalty, it's the crown of victory, Olympic crowns from the successes of their achievements.

And what's the significance of this? This is not just an act of deference, this is not like donning your cap at someone on your way into the pub or whatever, it's more than that. It is in the sense that the removal of any sense of human victory in front of the one who created you and all things.

[15 : 57] It's the recognition, isn't it, that the crown that is on their heads for the things that they have done, rightly belongs to the creator and not to them. Creatures, just because they're creatures understand that their creator is the crown wearer and not them.

Here's Murray again. Humility is not something we bring to God or he gives to us. It is simply the sense of entire nothingness, which comes when we see how truly God is all and in which we make way for God to be all.

Humility is simply acknowledging the truth of his position as creature and yielding to God his place. You are God.

I am not. Anything I have achieved belongs to you. All that I am is yours. I have nothing that I have not been given. I have no honor of my own except that which comes from you as a gift as my creator.

So perfect creatures, and that's what we can say of these 24 elders before the throne, perfect creatures throw their crowns before their creator. So don't you think you should?

[17 : 15] They only ever had the crown on alone. Now, let me try and unpack this in three different ways. how do we see our creatureliness before the creator God?

And we'll try and deal with these reasonably quickly. Consider your creatureliness in the aspect of your knowledge. I don't know if you're one of those people who likes to be in the know.

Are you someone who likes to be in the know? You like to feel like you know stuff and that you understand stuff? Maybe you're the kid in class who likes to have all the answers. Is that right? Yeah, I want to be the one that people turn to and that they think has got some knowledge puts me in a special category.

But as we meet the creator in God's word, we realise that he alone is the one who knows. I know partially.

I know in a time-bound way. He knows all things. He is the gatherer of the all-seeing creatures from all over the world. He is the one who knows all things.

[18 : 21] Our partial and limited knowledge is made up of stuff that we have heard or been given. All of our conclusions about all things are provisional. We have to recognise that we might be wrong.

We might not know and we might never know. But God's knowledge is ultimate. We know that the earth spins around the sun but God knows how it does and why it does and sustains it even as it does.

And learning this brings humility, doesn't it? Think about how little you know in relative terms. How little you will ever know. We don't even really know ourselves in any kind of deep way, do we?

We know parts about ourselves. God knows everything about us. We don't know the future. We don't know everything about the past. We are largely ignorant about everything.

Deuteronomy 29, 29 puts it like this, the secret things that belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

[19 : 26] In other words, anything that you know, you know because God has told you and he has taught you. Even those who don't acknowledge God as God, all that they know, they know because God has taught them and told them in his common grace to them.

All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in the Lord Jesus Christ. Yeah. And it's humbling, isn't it? It's actually brilliant, I think.

You and I only know what we need to know and we only know it because God has told it to us. Okay, what about presence?

Presence. So if you love to be someone who's in the know, that's what Anderson's like at school, right? I was the guy who wanted to be in the thick of it at school, right?

If there was a fight, I was there. I wanted to know what was going down, right? If there was a kind of rumbling that something was going to happen, I would be there just because I wanted to know what was going down.

[20 : 28] I did not want to miss out. I hated missing out and want to be in the right place at the right time. But our creator is everywhere all the time.

You know that only too well that you can only be in one place at one time and we feel the frustration of that, especially when we take on too much, we have too much going on. There's a word for that frustration that comes from taking on too much and wanting to be in every place at every time.

You know what the word is for that? Begins with P, ends in ride. It's pride, isn't it? It's the desire to be like God.

If only I could be in more than one place at one time. If only I could spread myself out more broadly than I can. But we come before God and we throw down, don't we?

We take off the crown of any sense of our own presence, any sense that we're in the thick of the action and we come before God and we lay it down knowing you're the omnipresent God.

[21 : 33] You're the one who knows all things, who is in every place at every time. We have feet of clay in one particular place at one particular time.

power. Again, it's an obvious point, isn't it? But it's humbling. Some of us want to know everything, some of us want to be in the thick of the action.

We all want to think that we can do stuff, don't we, and fix things and achieve things, make changes, push forward agendas, make plans. But the truth is we are utterly helpless.

We are unable to achieve anything in our own strength. We have absolutely no idea what will happen tomorrow. We've got a plan that there's going to be a holiday club here tomorrow, but we have absolutely no idea, do we, really, whether it's going to happen, whether we'll be able to achieve it.

But our creator is the maker and sustainer of all things. He's not just the watchmaker creator who kind of sets everything in motion and then just kind of leaves it and lets it get on with itself.

[22 : 41] Instead, it's under his power in every moment of every day. And he holds us and sustains us. It's his power that makes our hearts beat and puts breath in our lungs.

It's his power that keeps our feet stuck to the ground, the roof on this building. The words coming out of my mouth. I am just a creature and I am utterly helpless before his power.

Now, we could go on, couldn't we, but let's just put this together for a moment. We are to be humble because we are only ever creatures. So much so that the crowns that we have are to be thrown down before the God who really owns them.

So even outside of talking about the humility of recognizing our sin and our need of salvation, we just need to recognize that actually we are creatures before an all-sufficient God.

So if we are maybe a great artist or a fantastic accountant or we are a top business leader or a super bright academic or a brilliant preacher, whatever it is, any of those things are only ours because God has loaned them to us.

[23 : 55] They are his gifts to us, snippets of knowledge, snippets of power and presence that we have. They are Stephanos crowns of victory if you like, but they're not ours, they belong to him.

They're given to us by our creator and worshipping him involves taking the crown off and laying it down before him and saying all that I am is yours.

All that I am is yours. Everything that I have has come to us from you. We don't present them to him and plead on them, do we? It's not like we offer them to him. Look at all these great things I've done Lord.

It's not like that, is it? It's all this was yours. They were never ours in the first place. They belong to the one who gives all good things to us.

us. I want to take an opportunity to take questions or comments. So I'll give you a moment to have a think and a ponder and then I'll take your comments and questions and then we'll sing together.

[25 : 22] Anyone got a comment or a question? I'll do my shoelaces up while you do that because Vanessa got stressed out there. Is that better?

There you go. Right. I don't know how both shoelaces came undone at the same time. There you go. Magical. Anyone got a comment or a question? Yes. Yeah.

Why do some people find it easier than others? Do you know, that's a good question, France. I'm not, I mean, maybe we should talk about this together, but I'm not sure that, I'm not sure always that what looks like humility is humility.

There's a lot of frustrated pride, isn't there, in a sort of self-pitying, oh, I wish I was better at that. When I say, oh, it's just, I really wish I was better at that.

It's more, it's frustrated pride, isn't it? It's not humility. And so, I think probably some of us find it easier to express pride in self-confidence and other of us feel we express our pride in some kind of self-pity, don't we?

[26 : 48] Oh, you know, I'm rubbish. Well, actually, at the truth is, we're all nothing before the one who created us.

That's the truth of it. And everything I have and all that I need will come to me from him. And say, that's humility, isn't it? It's not the sort of self-pitying.

So I think, yeah, does that make sense? Go on. Feel free, go on, feel free to keep the conversation going if you want to come back to me if you like.

You don't have to. Someone else? Someone else? Help me out. I think sometimes the Lord teaches us humility by taking our plans away from us.

So I think if we want to grow in humility, sometimes we think it's going to be a really peaceful journey. And I think sometimes it can be a really painful one.

[27 : 53] I just think you need to not be scared of that. Yeah. Because I think that's a piece sometimes you can be fearful, but it's a loving, creative what is your father who lies behind.

Yeah. You understand him better. When you understand his creature, you're in a much better place, although you feel the nothing. Yeah. Yes.

I'm trying to summarize that Vanessa. Yeah. So the process of learning humility is painful and difficult, isn't it? Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. In his book, *Invest Your Suffering*, Paul Mallard describes it as if God gives us a load of stuff in life, doesn't he?

So he might give you certain abilities, he gives you certain energy levels, he might give you academic qualifications, he may give you a husband or a wife, he might give you children. And then life really is about giving them back.

[29 : 00] You know, you suddenly lose the energy level that you had. You might lose a child, you might lose your health, you might lose your husband or wife, you will, and you will eventually lose your life.

And you're giving it all back to the Lord who gave you all things. And the more that we can live our lives knowing that that is what is happening, and that all things are given to us by a God who loves us and is generous to us, but they're not ours, the more we can enjoy them.

The creature who enjoys the gifts the best is not the one who thought that they got them themselves, but is the one who is delighting in the one who gave them to them.

And so that's Christian joy, isn't it? Yeah. So are you saying the lack of recognition that's of that joy? Yes, a lack of recognition that all that we have comes from him robs us of joy.

Not only just joy in life in general, but joy in the gift. So if I think of the gift of my intellect as being mine, I won't enjoy it because it will be sort of ultimate to me and it will be fractured and broken and it will destroy me.

[30 : 16] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. We have to run away from God rather than run into it.

Yeah. And in much distance, I was talking to someone this morning and they were asking me a question and I said, the highest compliment you can pay to God is to be obedient. Mm-hmm.

Yes. So we we pay we comment God by obeying him.

But as long as in that sentence I'm understanding obedience as being something that I am actually only doing in the strength that he gives anyway. So I'm living the life that he has given me for his glory, recognizing that it's given to me by him and empowered by him.

Yes. Yeah.

[31 : 33] that is actually treating ourselves. And so the lack of humility is sort of at the root of a very single thing that goes wrong.

All of that meaning is actually saying, I'm not a man because I don't want to be a man.

Yes. I'm not a man. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yes. Yeah. That's really helpful. Thanks, David. And I think that the truth is that, that it's possible for churches just to sort of baptize a kind of Christian pride, isn't it?

That basically we look around and think we're slightly better than everybody else. Or even that we think we're slightly worse than everybody else and feel crushed by that. That's still pride. It's just, it's just pride meeting failure, isn't it? Yeah.

Yeah. Great. Okay. I'm going to call it to an end there because we've got humility again next week.

[32 : 29] And I would like us to sing. So let me pray and then we'll sing. Heavenly Father, we owe all things to you.

You are our creator. Who knows all things. Who is in all places at all times. And who powerfully sustains all things by the power of your word.

And Lord, we know very little. Only what you choose to reveal to us. We can only be in one place at one time, one brief moment of history.

We have no power of our own. We don't even know that we'll be here tomorrow. And so, Lord, we cast our crowns before you and acknowledge you to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Thank you that you love us. We thank you that we find great joy in humbly trusting you as the giver of all good gifts. And we praise your name.

[33 : 31] Amen. Amen.