



The Gentle Giant: Leading Humbly

The eighth in a series of nine leadership devotionals based on the fruit of the Spirit

Susan Gibbons

Scripture Passages

““He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.” (Psalm 25:9)

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your weary souls.” (Matthew 11:29)

Theme: The Gentle Giant: Leading Humbly

The other day a good friend of my husband’s told him about a woman he knows who wanted to obtain John Wooden’s signature on two pieces of memorabilia as a gift for her son. Having heard that Coach Wooden is accessible and generous with his time, she decided to send the items to him with her request.

Within a week, she received a phone call from Coach Wooden, explaining that the return envelope she had included was not large enough to hold the items. Wooden asked her if it would be alright if he got a larger envelope in which to return the signed items. The woman replied that she didn’t want to bother him, that his signature was already enough to ask. She would be in his area in the next couple of days so could he leave the items for her and she would stop by and pick them up. The coach gave her his home address and told her what time he would be there and invited her to come by – he’d be happy to meet her!

When she arrived, John opened the door and warmly invited her in. He gave her a tour of his home, showed her some of his favorite things and sat with her for an hour telling stories about his career and asking questions about her son. During this brief, seemingly small and unimportant encounter, John Wooden, a man who has reached the pinnacle of success in the highly competitive world of college basketball, the most admired college basketball coach in American history, a man who has received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, been honored as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Coach of the Year six times, and named

Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year and 40 for the Ages, and ESPN's Century's Greatest, and received many other high honors and awards over the course of his stellar 40 year career, proved himself true to his reputation for humility and kindness.

The Gospels in the New Testament record that Jesus talked a lot about humility (see Matthew 5:5, 18:4, and 23:12) and identified Himself as being “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). He frequently challenged the rulers of His day about their lack of humility, which is hubris, and warned them repeatedly that pride was the surest way to death (see Matthew 23:5-7). But like all of other aspects of spiritual fruit we've considered, humility just doesn't seem to fit the image of the “ideal” person our culture promotes today:

“Author and radio preacher John MacArthur was watching an MTV documentary entitled, ‘The Seven Deadly Sins.’ Because those seven sins – pride, covetousness, lust, anger, envy, gluttony, and sloth – are standard MTV fare, MacArthur wondered what the documentary would say... ‘It was an enlightening program. It clearly revealed the profound moral confusion of our culture. Rap singer Queen Latifah was asked about the sin of pride. ‘Pride is a sin?’ she responded. ‘I wasn't aware of that.’ Actress Kirstie Alley added, ‘I don't think pride is a sin...I think somebody made that up.’ Rapper Ice-T echoed the same idea; ‘Pride is mandatory. That's one of the problems of the inner city. Kids don't have enough pride. It seems that one of the basic teachings of scripture is totally out of touch with the values of our modern culture.’”¹

But Jesus loved kids precisely because they *weren't* prideful! (see Matthew 18:3-4) So who do we listen to when it comes to being humble; the world or Jesus?

In Psalm 25, David demonstrates the heart of the humble as he cries out unashamedly to God for protection from his enemies, for wisdom in God's ways, mercy, forgiveness for his past sins, and Israel's redemption. David makes his requests to God fully aware of his own inadequacies, in total assurance of God's complete adequacy and His steadfast love. Even though David had accomplished great victories, both political and spiritual, he still knew his limitations and frailties and because of them, relied on God, not on himself. In a word, David was humble.

In Hebrew, the word used by David in Psalm 25:9 to describe his perception of himself is *anaw* which means poor, oppressed, afflicted, humble. “It is used of persons who put themselves after others in importance; persons who are not proud, haughty, supercilious, self-assertive, low in rank or position.”² Did you catch that? It is used of persons who are NOT low in rank or position yet are not afflicted with hubris, who put others before themselves. David was certainly not low in rank yet he lived in humility before God (see 2 Samuel 24:10-17). Interestingly, the word is also used in reference to people who *are* low in social standing but exhibit this same attitude, intimating that it is not status or position that determines ability to be humble but the position of the heart and that of great value to God (see Proverbs 16:19). These people, the meek, gentle, humble people, are those whom God leads and teaches, according to the Psalm. Their spirits pliable and their hearts receptive to His ways, their humility endears them to God (see Psalm 149:4, Proverbs 15:33, 16:5, and Isaiah 57:15).

¹ Ward Williams, “Humble and Proud of it.” Available online at PreachingToday.com <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/32269>>.

² Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, The Complete WordStudy Dictionary, Old Testament. (Chattanooga: AMG 2003) 852.

So much so, in fact, that Jesus goes so far as to identify *Himself* as gentle and humble (Matthew 11:29), a description that certainly did not capture the essence of the Messiah his followers had anticipated. What is fascinating in this particular section is that Jesus is probably using/adapting/critiquing an older wisdom saying from the Intertestamental times, a section from The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach or Ecclesiasticus as it is sometimes known. Note how Jesus makes very provocative changes to conventional Hebrew wisdom here (from Sirach 30:10-13): “Share not in his frivolity lest you share in his sorrow, when finally your teeth are clenched in remorse. Give him not his own way in his youth, and close not your eyes to his follies. Bend him to the yoke when he is young, thrash his sides while he is still small, Lest he become stubborn, disobey you, and leave you disconsolate. Discipline your son, make heavy his yoke, lest his folly humiliate you.” The obvious changes in the words of Jesus highlight the call to humility and gentleness.

Recall that the Jews were expecting a new political kingdom to be established that would free Israel from Roman rule – a feat not likely accomplished through non-violent, gentle action - without military might or a political coup or the signs and wonders the Jews had come to expect (see Luke 11:16, 29, Matthew 12:38, Mark 8:11 and 1 Corinthians 1:22). And once the kingdom was established, who did the Jews expect would comprise its citizenry? Surely not the poor, meek, pure, peacemakers Jesus had so tenderly spoken of earlier (see Matthew 5:3-11). So far Jesus had gone about the business of establishing this new kingdom quietly, challenging the contemporary “wisdom” about how and whom Messiah would save by caring for the weak, sinful, forgotten people who needed His healing touch most, not calling attention to Himself but directing the attention to His Father with great love, humility, and devotion. No wonder even John the Baptist asked for clarification! (see Matthew 11:2-3)

When Jesus actually used the word *praos* (gentle) to describe Himself (Matthew 11:29) He was openly admitting that He possessed an “inward grace of the soul, calmness toward God in particular” characterized by “meekness, mildness, forbearance,” but which also demonstrates “wrath toward the sin of man.”³ But Jesus also included *tapeinos* (humble) in His self-description (Matthew 11:29), thereby confessing a lowness of attitude and social position, an affliction. He was telling the crowd that He, the One who was bringing the kingdom of God to earth was “humiliated in circumstance or disposition, base, cast down, humble, of low degree (estate), lowly.”⁴ It was crucial for Jesus’ followers to hear and understand this otherwise He would have allowed a gross misconception about the Messiah to shape their hearts and minds; “...humility constituted not only an essential aspect of Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God but was an equally essential aspect of his understanding of messiahship.”⁵ Therefore, His integrity required that He tell them clearly that He was not what they had expected, that He was not like the religious and political rulers of the day nor would He ever behave as they did in pursuit of His objective of ushering in the Kingdom of God! He wanted to be very clear that He cared passionately about man and his sin and would fight to the death for man’s salvation, but from a position of humility and love, not from worldly power and hate. And so He stands before them transparent and

³ Spiros Zodhiates, ed, The Complete WordStudy Dictionary New Testament. (Chattanooga: AMG 1993) 1208.

⁴ e-Sword Version 7.6.1 Available online at <<http://www.e-sword.net>>.

⁵ Craig Evans, “Jesus’ Ethic of Humility.” Trinity Journal 2 (1992): 127-23 Feb. 2007 First Search, ATLA Religion.

vulnerable and invites them, and us, to come to Him, the gentle and humble leader. When I think about the courage just that one statement must have required (He was human after all and knew people would laugh at Him and worse, and more than anything He wanted to draw people to Himself so they would be saved, not “turn them off” with His message) I see how it only could have been made out of the deepest, honest humility, out of that condition of His heart in which He knew who He was and what His purpose was and that He could not accomplish what He had to do without the direction and help of His Father! (see John 7:16, 8:28, 14:28, and 17:1-5)

Sometimes people confuse humility with weakness, self-abasement or self-loathing but through Jesus we learn that nothing could be farther from the truth! Jesus did not think less of Himself because He was dependent on and obedient to His Father (see John 14:6), He just thought of Himself less than He thought of others because that was His state of mind, and that is the essence of humility. I’m sorry Ice-T but you’ve got it backward. It’s the values of modern culture that are totally out of touch with the teachings of scripture, not the other way around.

By the way, if humility is so passé, why do respondents in survey after survey say they want leaders who are humble?⁶ And why is so much being written about the value of humility in leaders?⁷ The answer is simple; because “humble individuals will not willfully distort information in order to defend, repair, or verify their own image. For humble people, there should be no press toward self-importance and no burning need to see - or present - themselves as being better than they actually are. They should also not be particularly interested in dominating others in order to receive entitlements or to elevate their own status.”⁸ It’s not difficult to hear Jesus’ proclamation of His gentleness and humility ringing through this definition.

In a possible working definition of humility, six integral elements of humility are revealed:⁹

1. An accurate (not underestimated) sense of one’s abilities and achievements
2. The ability to acknowledge one’s mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge and limitations (often with reference to a “higher power”)
3. Openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice
4. Keeping one’s abilities and accomplishments in perspective
5. Relatively low focus on the self or an ability to “forget the self”
6. Appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world.

⁶ Mark Kriger and Yvonne Seng, “Leadership with inner meaning: A contingency theory of leadership based on the worldviews of five religions,” *Leadership Quarterly: An International Journal of Political, Social, and Behavioral Science* 16.5 (2005): 771-806

⁷ Jim Collins, “Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve.” *Harvard Business Review* (July-August 2005): 136-146.

Olli-Pekka Kallasvuo, “Moments of Truth: Humility.” *Harvard Business Review Special Issue* (Jan. 2007): 16. Deborah Ancona, Thomas Malone, Wanda Orlikowski and Peter Senge, “In Praise of the Incomplete Leader.” *Harvard Business Review* (Feb. 2007): 92-100.

< http://speaksoftly.blogs.com/speak_softly/2005/09/wanted_humble_1.htm <<http://newandimproved.com/newsletter/2030.php>>
<<http://www.cio.com/leadership/leadership/baldoni/column.html?ID=25079>>

⁸ Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Values: A Handbook and Classification*. (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association 2004) 463.

⁹ *ibid* 462.

Morris et al looked at humility in leaders and found three connected but distinct dimensions: Self-awareness (the ability to understand one’s strengths and weaknesses), openness (knowing one’s imperfections, when things are beyond one’s control and a willingness to learn from others), and transcendence (the acceptance of something greater than the self that leads to an understanding of the small role one plays in a vast universe),¹⁰ all of which are readily observable in the scriptures. In Romans 12:3 Paul exhorts the Christian to, “not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each in accordance with the measure of faith that God has assigned.” And in Romans 7:14-20 Paul openly confesses his personal limitations and utter lack of control over his flesh when he cries out, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” And Paul’s humility is proven authentic because he is able to keep his accomplishments in proper perspective and transcend his human frailty by measuring it all against Christ, “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith” (Philippians 3:7-9).

Like Jesus, Paul lived under the mantle of humility. He understood that, “the axe cannot boast of the trees it has cut down. It could do nothing but for the woodsman. He made it, he sharpened it, and he used it. The moment he throws it aside; it becomes only old iron.”¹¹ And Paul never wanted to forget that!

In a culture obsessed with promoting the false self through its relentless pursuit of self-esteem, a culture where “individuals now view pride as not only acceptable but worthy, whether it takes the form of overestimating one’s good qualities and traits, viewing the self as better than average, or basking in unconditional praise despite lukewarm performance,”¹² how are pride and humility to be reconciled? For the true follower of Christ, I don’t believe they can be for the two concepts are diametrically opposed, just as the false self constantly wars against the authentic self. Like David, Jesus, and Paul, we have to choose to be conformed to one or the other. And what will enable us to choose wisely to stand humbly in allegiance with Jesus? Only love.¹³

Leadership/OD Concept

Servant Leadership

Leader/follower relationship

¹⁰ J. Andrew Morris, Celeste Brotheridge and John Urbanski, “Bringing Humility to Leadership: Antecedents and Consequences of Leader Humility.” *Human Relations* 58.10 (Oct. 2005): 1331-21 Feb. 2007 ABI/INFORM Global.

¹¹ Samuel Brengle as quoted in J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer*. 2nd rev (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994) 62.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ George Morgan, “The Fruit of the Spirit,” ed. Warren Wiersbe, *Classic Sermons on the Fruit of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2002) 19.

Wisdom of the Ages

“When we believe that God was made man to be for us an example of humility and to demonstrate God’s love for us, our thought is transformed by this knowledge. It is good for us to believe and to keep steadfastly unshaken in our hearts that the humility whereby God was born of a woman and shamefully brought by mortal men to death is the supreme medicine to heal that swelling of our pride and the exalted mystery that can loose the shackles of sin.” Augustine of Hippo, “On the Trinity” chapter 5.

Example of the Devotional

For 15 years, Hank had served as the youth pastor at a small, community church. He loved the youth and was greatly loved by them. He believed he would always serve at that church and was content to be used in the capacity that brought him such joy and fulfillment. But the senior pastor’s unexpected resignation changed Hank’s ministry forever. Called by the elders to serve as the interim senior pastor while the search for a new leader was conducted, Hank reluctantly agreed to help out. The first year, Hank sought advice and guidance from elders and several trusted members to help him make the transition into the senior position. He worked hard to balance the needs of the congregation with the needs of the youth for whom he retained responsibility. In time, Hank believed he was doing well and settled in to the position.

Meanwhile, the search continued for a senior pastor but after a year and a half, none had been found. For months the elders met and conferred among themselves whether Hank should be made senior pastor and, with the conditional consent of the search committee, offered him the position. Among the conditions for his promotion were items regarding the need for him to acquire formal instruction and informal mentoring given his limited background. Hank agreed to the conditions and accepted the position.

The elders waited patiently for Hank to engage in the development program they had required but soon found themselves locked in a power struggle with him over many matters. Hank recognized many weaknesses in his leadership team and determined they should participate in leadership development. An outside consultant was brought in who worked with all of the leaders, including Hank. But the consultant soon realized that Hank was unwilling or unable to honestly evaluate his own weaknesses and then work to improve them, preferring instead to behave as though he knew every new idea and concept the consultant offered. In the pulpit, Hank appeared more and more self-assured and even “humbly” commented frequently about the great progress he had made in his position. He also spoke openly about how difficult it was being senior pastor and how sometimes he didn’t even want to come to church but that he persevered for the sake of “his” people. But his words seemed hollow and instead of appearing humble to his congregation, he appeared prideful and arrogant.

Unfortunately, because many of Hank’s leaders who participated in the development program had grown through the process, they now found it difficult to serve under him. Others left the church in search of a leader they could respect. In three years, he had not grown, not gotten the education he needed, and had not humbled himself to be disciplined by a mentor and it showed, in spite of Hank’s best efforts to conceal it.

Application of the Devotional

Clearly, Hank would have benefited significantly from self-awareness, openness, and transcendence. Just a small amount of self-awareness would have caused him to realize he was not fully equipped to lead a

church and needed instruction and mentoring. Openness would have resulted in a willingness to listen to the consultant instead of trying to prove he possessed the same knowledge and expertise. And transcendence would have caused him to yield it all to God in the full assurance of His power over and provision for Hank and more importantly, His church.

In business, leaders frequently fall prey to hubris, just as Hank did. They believe their own “hype” about themselves and the very drive and self-promotion that got them into their position now causes their downfall. Without true self-awareness, openness, and transcendence, leaders will most certainly lose their effectiveness and credibility and eventually, themselves.

Practical exercises

Humility is a tricky thing; as soon as we think we are humble, we’re not! So working to become more humble is a dangerous proposition. Even more than all of the other aspects of Holy Spirit’s fruit we’ve considered so far, humility is not a virtue to be possessed; it is the tone and tenor of *agape* love.¹⁴ I believe this is what Paul meant when he said that all of our works, if not done in love’s humility, amount to the noise of a gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). In that passage I see that I can act spiritual, have great faith, produce works, and be generous without the humility love begets and that in so doing, I’m just making a lot of irritating noise. It’s not enough to do the “right” things; I really have to *be* the right person. And that is the goal of spiritual formation.

So Richard Foster’s presentation of the discipline of *submission* seems appropriate to the cultivation of humility. Of the freedom that comes with submission he writes, “It is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way. The obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society today.”¹⁵ As submission disarms our emotional programs for happiness, it produces the rest for our souls, just as Jesus promised! (see Matthew 11:29) When we submit our lives and wills to the Triune God, the Scripture, our families, our neighbors and those we encounter in our daily lives, to the community of believers, to the downtrodden and rejected and finally to the world,¹⁶ we allow ourselves to be reprogrammed to God’s version of happiness, namely living life in unity with Him! We allow Him to transform us into His image and stop being held hostage by the image of ourselves we fight so vehemently to protect.

¹⁴ Morgan 19

¹⁵ Foster 111

¹⁶ *ibid* 122-123

Suggested Further Reading

Foster, Richard. Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998.

Jones, Thomas and Michael Fontenot. The Proudful Soul's Guide to Humility. Billerica: Discipleship Publications International, 2003.

Kemp, Kenny. The Welcoming Door: Parables of the Carpenter. New York: Harper Collins, 2002.

Murray, Andrew. Humility: The Fear of the Lord is the Instruction in Wisdom, and Before Honor is Humility, Proverbs 15:33. New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2005.

Sanders, J. Oswald. Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer. Chicago: Moody, 1994.

Sheldon, Charles. In His Steps. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Wooden, John and Jay Carty. Coach Wooden One-On-One: Inspiring Conversations on the Purpose, Passion, and the Pursuit of Success. Ventura: Regal, 2003.