

NOVEMBER 15, 2021

# You Are Not Nothing

## Five Ways to Pursue Real Humility



Article by [Randy Newman](#) 

Author, Questioning Evangelism

I recently had the incomparable joy of visiting the Grand Canyon. Though *visit* isn't quite the right word, I suppose. You don't just visit the Grand Canyon — you marvel at it, stand in awe of it, catch your breath before it, and find yourself transfixed and transformed by it. You come away “canyoned” by the juxtaposed emotions of feeling smaller and bigger at the same time. As a Christian, I reveled in knowing that the Creator of such beauty also happens to be the Savior of my soul.

I believe gospel-shaped humility can have similar effects. It makes us feel smaller and bigger at the same time. But only if we have a proper understanding of humility, carefully defined,

delineated, displayed, and distinguished — that is, only if we move past some common confusions about humility.

## Humility Confused

I've heard some Christians say things like, "I'm nothing. I'm just a worm." Or, "I didn't do a thing. I'm just an empty vessel." I don't think such statements reflect a healthy view of humility. The New Testament calls us saints and God's children and goes out of its way to declare just how loved, redeemed, and blessed we are. Our new identity cannot square with "I'm nothing."

It's easy to get confused about humility. Consider how C.S. Lewis put these directions into the mouth of Screwtape, the senior demon in charge of training a new tempter:

Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? . . . Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, "By jove! I'm being humble," and almost immediately pride — pride at his own humility — will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt — and so on, through as many stages as you please. But don't try this too long, for fear you awake his sense of humor and proportion, in which case he will merely laugh at you and go to bed.

*(The Screwtape Letters, 69)*

## Humility Defined

Merriam-Webster defines humility as "freedom from pride or arrogance." But that leaves us needing another definition — one for pride. And we need the Bible's authority, not the dictionary's, to help us most.

I suggest this definition adapted from [Romans 12:3](#): humility is not thinking of yourself more highly than you ought but with sober judgment, according to what God says in his word. Thus, growing in humility is a lifelong venture as you increase in knowledge of God's word and in appreciation for God's work through Christ.

## Humility Delineated

Clear thinking about humility is on display in Andrew Murray's classic short book *Humility: The Beauty of Holiness*. He starts with this insight: "There are three great motives that urge us to humility. It becomes me as a creature, as a sinner, as a saint" (10).

First, we should be humbled by the fact that we did not create ourselves or have any say in the specifics of our birth. How is it that you weren't born in the 1300s in an obscure, poverty-stricken, disease-ridden village? Can you provide breath at any given moment? Which talents came from your blueprint, and not God's? Consider Paul's insightful question, "What do you have that you did not receive?" ([1 Corinthians 4:7](#)).

Second, humility befits our fallenness. We're sinners, rebels, transgressors, and worshipers of false gods. Reflect on Paul's recounting of our before-salvation résumé: "We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another" ([Titus 3:3](#)).

Third, we are saved by grace, "not because of works done by us in righteousness" ([Titus 3:5](#)) "so that no one may boast" ([Ephesians 2:9](#)).

## Humility Displayed

Humility's central text is [Philippians 2:1–11](#), where Jesus is lifted up as the perfect example of humility. It's easy to zoom in on verse 5, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus," and think, "I should be humble like Jesus was humble." He is indeed our supreme example.

But we can follow his example only because he was also our supreme sacrifice. Don't race past the first phrase of this chapter: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ . . ." It is your union with Christ that transforms you into a new creature who can "consider others better than yourself," and "look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" ([Philippians 2:1–4 NIV](#)).

## Humility Distinguished

Humility, as the Bible puts forth, must be distinguished from vague ideas apart from the specifics of the gospel. Humility is not feeling bad about oneself. Humility is not comparing ourselves to others. And humility isn't merely the absence of boasting. (What goes on inside our heads can be disgustingly self-exalting even while we keep our mouths shut.)

Humility shaped by the gospel shows us just how bad we are and, at the same time, just how great God's salvation is. It chastens while it emboldens. It puts us in our place, which, amazingly, is a place of both contrition and confidence. It is a proper and complete understanding of who we are — created, fallen, redeemed, and blessed. We live out our lives in humble boldness, knowing we deserve wrath instead of grace, judgment instead of justification, separation from God instead of the indwelling of his Spirit.

## Humility Pursued

Note what immediately follows [Philippians 2:1–11](#). Verse 12 begins with “therefore” and goes on to tell us to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling.” We do have a part to play in pursuing humility. Consider some practical suggestions.

### **BODILY PRAYERFULNESS**

The position of our bodies can make a difference in our prayer lives. Kneeling while interceding, raising our arms while praising, and opening our palms while giving thanks can intensify the blessings received through prayer. And it can help us grow in humility before God. It's hard (although not impossible!) to feel self-empowered while kneeling.

### **RIGOROUS CONFESSION**

I'll let C.S. Lewis present this case for me. He writes in [\*The Weight of Glory\*](#),

I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking him to do something quite different. I am asking him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing.

Forgiveness says, “Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.” But excusing says, “I see that you couldn't help it or didn't mean it; you weren't really to blame.” If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites. (178–79)

Humility makes a regular practice of asking God, and others, to forgive us instead of excuse us.

### **REGULAR PERIODS OF FASTING**

Simply put, fasting makes us feel physically weak. That's a good state for trusting entirely in God's provision for everything. Fasting can take all sorts of forms and varieties. All of them can help in growth toward humility.

## **OUTWARD-FACING INTERCESSION**

Jesus told us to include “our daily bread” (the most basic unit of physical sustenance) as well as “your kingdom come” (the most expansive scope of church growth) in our prayers. Prayer guides like *Operation World* (both the book and the app), which inform us how to pray for gospel advance in every country, help us see our individual needs on a larger canvas and forge humility.

## **OTHERS-CENTERED CONVERSATION**

Many so-called dialogues are really simultaneous monologues. A gospel-humbled conversationalist can allow the interchange to be unbalanced — in the direction of the *other* person. Asking questions to draw more out of the other person can display Philippians 2 humility in tangible, practical ways.

## **Bowing Low, Standing Tall**

Some might say standing before the Grand Canyon should have made me feel like “nothing.” But that wasn't my experience. To be sure, I had no doubt that the nearly two thousand square miles of a mile-deep chasm dwarfed my 5-foot, 9-inch frame. If I did not know the Creator of both the physical universe and my physical body, I would have felt like dust.

But standing before an even greater wonder — the cross, where we are “united with Christ . . . in the comfort from his love . . . with the fellowship of the Holy Spirit . . . with tenderness and compassion” ([Philippians 2:1 NIV](#)) — forges a gospel-humility that bows us low and stands us tall.