

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Learning to be like Christ: Learning Humility

I love the true story of the missionary who went to a village in China. He didn't know that an earlier missionary had lived there a few years before. This second missionary started to tell the people about Jesus – how He went about doing good, how He was ready to receive all who came to Him, even the little children. After he had been speaking in this way for a few minutes, one of the villagers called out, "That man stayed in our village a few years ago." Of course, the villager was mistaken, but what a lovely mistake to make! As the villager had listened to the message about Jesus, and as he remembered the former missionary who had lived amongst them, he thought that they were one and the same person! Would that anyone might make the same mistake about me!

Today, we are beginning a series of four talks on the important subject of '*Learning to be like Christ*'. That's a subject that should be of vital concern to every Christian. It's the reason why God leaves us here in this world instead of taking us to heaven immediately after trusting Christ as Saviour. As children of God, He wants us to be like His Son, Jesus Christ. But that is not something that happens automatically. We have to learn to be like Christ.

When we trusted Christ as our Saviour, we received God's free gift of eternal life. As Paul writes to the Romans, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). But eternal life is much more than just a life that will go on forever – it is the very life of Christ Himself! So John writes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us" (1 John 1:1-2). Just pause for a moment to let the wonder of those words sink in! By grace, we have been given that very same life that was seen in the Lord Jesus when He was here. But as Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels", that is, in our human bodies. That's why we need to learn to be like Christ. In the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells every true believer, we need to let that life of Christ shine out through our lives.

In a coming day, we are going to be like Him! We have the glorious promise, "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). That will be the wonderful result of that day when the Lord Jesus comes for His Church to take each one home to Himself in heaven. Paul writes to the Philippians, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able to subdue all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:20-21). But God wants us to be like Him now, not just in that future day!

In one of the most amazing verses of Scripture, Paul writes, "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). Those words were written to a group of Christians whose behaviour was far from perfect. The church at Corinth was guilty of divisions, of immorality, of gluttony – to name some of their failings. But Paul would remind them, and us, that as possessors of eternal life, they had an inbuilt capacity to think like Christ, to see things around them as Christ would see them. But they needed to let that mind of Christ operate in them! Katie Barclay Wilkinson captures something of that sense of need in her lovely hymn,

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour  
Live in me from day to day,  
By His love and power controlling  
All I do and say.*

She concludes,

*May His beauty rest upon me  
As I seek the lost to win,  
And may they forget the channel  
Seeing only Him.*

We have spent some time just considering the title to these next four talks but I felt it important to think about the significance of it. Our talk today is on the subject '*Learning humility*'. In the next three weeks, God willing, we will look at '*Learning longsuffering*', '*Learning self-control*', and '*Learning forgiveness*'. Let me say straight away that I cannot speak as an expert on this subject of humility. The lessons that we will learn as we look into it, I still need to learn. It will be helpful to look at our subject under two headings:

1. Why learn humility?
2. How do we learn humility?

### Why learn humility?

Before answering that question, we ought to be clear in our minds what we mean by humility? In some ways, it is easier to begin by considering what it is not. Some of you will have read Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*. You may recall that odious character, Uriah Heep and his fawning words, "I am well aware that I am the 'umblest person going ... My mother is likewise a very 'umble person. We live in a 'umble abode, Master Copperfield". Despite his pretence of humility, through his self-seeking and trickery, he amassed a fortune at the expense of others. All of us are naturally repulsed by such blatant hypocrisy. From the dictionary, we learn that humility is the attitude of "having or showing a low estimate of one's own importance".

The first answer to our question must be the fact that Christ Himself practised humility. In His coming into the world, He chose to be born not in the royal palace of King Herod but in a cattle shed because "there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). His childhood and adult years were mainly passed not in Jerusalem with its temple, but in Nazareth, a despised city that had such a poor reputation that Nathanael was forced to ask, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). In His years with His disciples, He had no permanent place which He could call home, but had to say, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20).

Christ's humility is especially seen in an incident with His twelve disciples just before the cross. We will read the account in John 13:1-5: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And supper being ended, the devil having put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded."

It would normally have been the job of the lowest servant in the house to have washed the feet of the visitors as soon as they entered. But some time had elapsed – they had already finished supper – and no one had undertaken the job of feet washing. All the disciples clearly thought that it was a job beneath them! But Jesus, in the full consciousness of His dignity as having come forth from God, stoops to wash His disciples' feet!

But the humility of Jesus is seen supremely in the cross of Calvary. We'll read Paul's moving description of that event: "Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

The soldiers who stripped Jesus of His own clothes and, in mockery, put on Him a scarlet robe, might have thought that they were humbling Jesus. The rulers, with the people, who mocked Jesus, "saying, 'He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God'" (Luke 23:35), might have thought that they, too, were humbling Jesus. But all their mockery and their desire to abase Jesus could not compare with this tremendous fact, "He humbled Himself"! Jesus' words to Pilate, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11) might well be written over all the efforts of His enemies to humble Him. But no! "He humbled Himself"! In wonderful love, for His God and Father, and for us, Jesus chose to give Himself at Calvary. There He bore the judgment of God against sin that should rightfully have fallen upon us so that our sins might be forgiven and we might receive God's free gift of eternal life.

Because Christ practised humility, He invites us as His followers, to practise it too. We may gladly have responded to His gracious invitation, "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." But Jesus' invitation does not stop there! He goes on to say, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). In the school of God, we are all learners. We never get to discard our L-plates down here! It was in that same spirit that Jesus, after He had washed His disciples' feet, said unto them, "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:13-15).

The second answer to our question, 'Why learn humility?' must be that God's word enjoins it. There are some challenging words in the book of the prophet Micah: "[God] has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). The repeated challenge of the New Testament is just the same. Paul writes, "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another" (Colossians 3:12-13). Peter writes in similar vein: "Yes, all of you, be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time" (1 Peter 5:5-6). In those words, Peter is quoting from Proverbs 3:34. James, too, writes, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:10).

### How do we learn humility?

I guess all of us would wish that there were some easy answers to this question. There are no quick fixes. Learning humility is a lifelong process which may frequently cause us to despair and to have to say with Paul, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practise" (Romans 7:18-19). May I suggest three things that might help us in learning humility?

In this talk, we have focused at some length on the fact that Christ Himself is the great example of humility. It should be clear, then, that we need to spend time in His word, reading about Him, learning about Him, seeing Him at work in the Gospels. In that way, we will become more like Him. Perhaps Paul had something of that in mind when he wrote, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). At one time, it was quite fashionable for young Christians to wear a bracelet inscribed with the letters, WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? That's a good question to ask in any situation, but we will not know the answer unless we have spent time learning from Him in His word.

Secondly, recognise with thankfulness that our new life in Christ is the same life as seen in Him when He was here. Moreover, we also have God's indwelling Holy Spirit within us to help us. Let us be in no doubt about this. "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Galatians 4:6). "Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee" (2 Corinthians 5:5). The Spirit of God would make us more like Christ.

Thirdly, we will need to ask God's help that our new nature in Christ, and not our old nature in Adam, is the one that will be seen. God has grace to meet our every need. It was in all his affliction that Paul received that wonderful promise from God, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Of that same grace, James writes, "But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (James 4:6). It is interesting that here James quotes from Proverbs 3:34, just as we saw Peter did in an earlier scripture (1 Peter 5:5).

We may need to make the words of the chorus our prayer:

*Lord, bend that proud and stiff-necked I,  
Help me to bow the head and die,  
Beholding Him at Calvary  
Who bowed the head for me!*

We close with the encouraging words of John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*:

*He that is down need fear no fall,  
He that is low no pride.  
He that is humble ever shall  
Have God to be his guide.*

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