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[Christianity Today, December, 2008](#)

The Advent of Humility

Jesus is the reason to stop concentrating on ourselves.

Tim Keller | posted 12/22/2008 05:07PM

Innumerable Christmas devotionals point out the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth—among shepherds, in a crude stable, with a feed trough for a bassinet. When Jesus himself tried to summarize why people should take up the yoke of following him, he said it was because he was meek and humble (Matt. 11:29). Seldom, however, do we explore the full implications of how Jesus' radical humility shapes the way we live our lives every day.

Humility is crucial for Christians. We can only receive Christ through meekness and humility (Matt. 5:3, 5; 18:3-4). Jesus humbled himself and was exalted by God (Phil. 2:8-9); therefore joy and power through humility is the very dynamic of the Christian life (Luke 14:11; 18:14; 1 Pet. 5:5).

The teaching seems simple and obvious. The problem is that it takes great humility to understand humility, and even more to resist the pride that comes so naturally with even a discussion of the subject.

We are on slippery ground because humility cannot be attained directly. Once we become aware of the poison of pride, we begin to notice it all around us. We hear it in the sarcastic, snarky voices in newspaper columns and weblogs. We see it in civic, cultural, and business leaders who never admit weakness or failure. We see it in our neighbors and some friends with their jealousy, self-pity, and boasting.

And so we vow not to talk or act like that. If we then notice "a humble turn of mind" in ourselves, we immediately become smug—but that is pride in our humility. If we catch ourselves doing *that* we will be particularly impressed with how nuanced and subtle we have become. Humility is so shy. If you begin talking about it, it leaves. To even ask the question, "Am I humble?" is to not be so. Examining your own heart, even for pride, often leads to being proud about your diligence and circumspection.

Christian humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less, as C. S. Lewis so memorably said. It is to be no longer always noticing yourself and how you are doing and how you are being treated. It is "blessed self-forgetfulness."

Humility is a byproduct of belief in the gospel of Christ. In the gospel, we have a confidence

not based in our performance but in the love of God in Christ (Rom. 3:22-24). This frees us from having to always be looking at ourselves. Our sin was so great, nothing less than the death of Jesus could save us. He *had* to die for us. But his love for us was so great, Jesus was *glad* to die for us.

Grace, Not Goodness

We are on slippery ground when we discuss humility, because religion and morality inhibit humility. It is common in the evangelical community to talk about one's worldview—a set of basic beliefs and commitments that shape the way we live in every particular. Others prefer the term "narrative identity." This is a set of answers to the questions, "Who am I? What is my life all about? What am I here for? What are the main barriers keeping me from fulfillment? How can I deal with those barriers?"

There are two basic narrative identities at work among professing Christians. The first is what I will call the moral-performance narrative identity. These are people who in their heart of hearts say, *I obey; therefore I am accepted by God*. The second is what I will call the grace narrative identity. This basic operating principle is, *I am accepted by God through Christ; therefore I obey*.

People living their lives on the basis of these two different principles may superficially look alike. They may sit right beside one another in the church pew, both striving to obey the law of God, to pray, to give money generously, to be good family members. But they are doing so out of radically different motives, in radically different spirits, resulting in radically different personal characters.

When persons living in the moral-performance narrative are criticized, they are furious or devastated because they cannot tolerate threats to their self-image of being a "good person."

But in the gospel our identity is not built on such an image, and we have the emotional ballast to handle criticism without attacking back. When people living in the moral-performance narrative base their self-worth on being hard working or theologically sound, then they *must* look down on those whom they perceive to be lazy or theologically weak.

But those who understand the gospel cannot possibly look down on anyone, since they were saved by sheer grace, not by their perfect doctrine or strong moral character.

The Stench of Moralism

Another mark of the moral-performance narrative is a constant need to find fault, win arguments, and prove that all opponents are not just mistaken but dishonest sellouts. However, when the gospel is deeply grasped, our need to win arguments is removed, and our language becomes gracious. We don't have to ridicule our opponents, but instead we can engage them respectfully.

People who live in the moral-performance narrative use sarcastic, self-righteous putdown humor, or have no sense of humor at all. Lewis speaks of "the unsmiling concentration upon

Self, which is the mark of hell." The gospel, however, creates a gentle sense of irony. We find a lot to laugh at, starting with our own weaknesses. They don't threaten us anymore because our ultimate worth is not based on our record or performance.

Martin Luther had the basic insight that moralism is the default mode of the human heart. Even Christians who believe the gospel of grace on one level can continue to operate as if they have been saved by their works. In "The Great Sin" in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes, "If we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the Devil."

Gracious, self-forgetful humility should be one of the primary things that distinguishes Christian believers from the many other types of moral, decent people in the world. But I think it is fair to say that humility, which is a key differentiating mark of the Christian, is largely missing in the church. Nonbelievers, detecting the stench of sanctimony, turn away.

Some will say, "Phariseism and moralism are not our culture's big problems right now. Our problems are license and antinomianism. There is no need to talk about grace all the time to postmodern people." But postmodern people have been rejecting Christianity for years, thinking that it was indistinguishable from moralism. Only if you show them there's a difference—that what they rejected wasn't real Christianity—will they even begin to listen again.

Get Your Fresh Humility Here

This is the place where the author is supposed to come up with practical solutions. I don't have any. Here's why.

First, the problem is too big for practical solutions. The wing of the evangelical church that is most concerned about the loss of truth and about compromise is actually infamous in our culture for its self-righteousness and pride. However, there are many in our circles who, in reaction to what they perceive as arrogance, are backing away from many of the classic Protestant doctrines (such as Forensic Justification and Substitutionary Atonement) that are crucial and irreplaceable — as well as the best possible resources for humility.

Second, directly talking about practical ways to become humble, either as individuals or as communities, will always backfire. I have said that major wings of the evangelical church are wrong. So who is left? Me? Am I beginning to think only we few, we happy few, have achieved the balance that the church so needs? I think I hear Wormwood whispering in my ear, "Yes, only you can really see things clearly."

I do hope to clarify, or I wouldn't have written on the topic at all. But there is no way to begin telling people how to become humble without destroying what fragments of humility they may already possess.

Third, humility is only achieved as a byproduct of understanding, believing, and marveling

in the gospel of grace. But the gospel doesn't change us in a mechanical way. Recently I heard a sociologist say that for the most part, the frameworks of meaning by which we navigate our lives are so deeply embedded in us that they operate "pre-reflectively." They don't exist only as a list of propositions, but also as themes, motives, and attitudes. When we listen to the gospel preached or meditate on it in the Scriptures, we are driving it so deeply into our hearts, imaginations, and thinking that we begin to instinctively "live out" the gospel.

So let us preach grace till humility just starts to grow in us.

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