

The Uncommon Virtue of Humility

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the uncommon virtue of humility, emphasizing the joy in recognizing the infinite superiority of Christ over ourselves in every aspect. It explores the distinction between common virtues and uncommon virtues rooted in faith in Christ, highlighting the need to be pleased with Christ's exaltation and to groan over our tendencies towards self-exaltation. The sermon draws insights from Isaiah 2 and Philippians 2 to underscore God's exaltation and the call to humble ourselves before His splendor and majesty.

Scripture: Isaiah 2:11, Philippians 2:9, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Romans 14:23, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Humility", "Exaltation of Christ"

Description

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Transcript

Amen. Lord, grant that in the song and in the word we would be like John the Baptist who saw the bridegroom, beheld his glory, and was so moved with joy that he rejoiced to say, he must increase, he must increase, and we must decrease. Make that our gladness, I pray in his name.

Amen. You may be seated. Before I try to define the uncommon virtue of humility, let me give three clarifications that limit and guide my effort.

Number one, clarification number one, I want to get in step with President Rigney's direction that he set for us on January 19 when this series began, and he explained what it meant that he wanted us to talk about uncommon virtues. So first he defined virtue like this, the habitual good exercises and inclinations of the heart toward good things, and the virtue consists in the beauty of those exercises of the heart. And then he defined uncommon virtues like this.

First, they're uncommon, and this is least important, because they're rare in culture and in the church. Most important is this, he said that they're uncommon virtues because they are rooted in what makes us Christian. In other words, the uncommon virtues flow from union with Christ, from faith in Christ.

Therefore, no unbeliever has any uncommon virtues as Joe defined them and as I'm defining it. They exercise common virtues, unbelievers do, but they are radically different than what we're talking about, namely uncommon virtues because they have no roots in their union with Christ, because they have no union with Christ. Those virtues that you see in your unbelieving friends are shells where the soul has been removed.

Now most of you have learned in your time here, if not before, the difference between common grace and special or saving grace. So God, by his common grace, enables unbelievers to perform common virtues, and the New Testament even calls them at times good, temporal good, horizontal good, pursuing some human betterment, horizontally, not vertically. For example, first Peter chapter 2 verse 14 says that the emperor sends governors to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good.

Well, the pagan emperor hasn't a clue what good is. Vertically, true good, true uncommon virtue. Nevertheless, the Bible is willing to call them, at the horizontal level, good.

But the Bible is very radical in saying that good is sinful. Romans 14 23, whatever is not from faith is sin. They don't flow from union with Christ and faith in him.

They don't flow from any sense to comport our lives according to his word or seek his glory, and therefore they are sin. Which means this, so crucial for you, in all of our ethical thinking, in all of our moral assessments of culture, people's daily living, we must have the category of good sin, sinful good, which if you think carefully, which is why you're here, and you think biblically, that's not double talk. It is a good thing that my Muslim neighbor does not burn down my house.

I am thankful for that good, and he does nothing in reliance upon Jesus. He does nothing guided by the words of Jesus. He does nothing for the glory of Jesus, which means it is sinful not to burn down my house.

It brings me and him a temporal good and dishonors the most glorious person in the universe. So, in accord with President Rigney's direction, I'm riveting my focus, and it was very constraining, on the uncommon virtue of humility. I'm seeking to define humility as a distinctly Christian virtue in relation to Jesus.

That's clarification number one. Here's number two. Tim Keller said about 14 years ago in an article in Christianity Today, humility is so shy that if you begin talking about it, it leaves.

Now, if you took that literally, it would be impossible to talk humbly about humility. I don't think it's true, and I don't think Tim Keller thinks it's true either. Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, virtually every writer in the Bible talks about humility in one way or the other, and I'm not going to indict every biblical author with arrogance as they talk about humility.

Instead, here's what I think my friend Tim Keller means. He's a very bright person. He's not stupid.

I think what he's trying to communicate is Christian humility flourishes in the human soul when we are standing in front of a window onto the Himalayas of the grandeur of Christ, and it shrivels, indeed vanishes, if you are standing in front of a mirror to test the authenticity of your humility. Christian humility vanishes if you look directly at it and assess whether it is good or not, adequate or not. So my goal is not primarily to focus your attention mirror- like on humility, but to provide you with an understanding of humility that will drive you to the windows of the Word that revealed the greatness of Christ.

Clarification number three, finally. Words are dumb things. Not stupid.

Unable to communicate anything clear, anything distinct by themselves. They have no clarity, they have no clear content until they are used in a context. So when I say they're used, I mean there's a user.

And so when I'm asked, which I was months ago, to talk about humility, I'm asking, who's the user? Whose humility are you talking about? It's used a thousand ways in the world. What are you asking of me? What user do you want me to get on to, to discern how that user is using the Word, using words to describe this reality? And I want to know what context I'm being asked to consult. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

The typical, most common New Testament word for humility, *tope nephrosune*, is used in Colossians by the false teachers to mean asceticism and harshness to the body. So Paul says in Colossians 2.18, let no one disqualify you insisting on humility, *tope nephrosune*, and worship of angels. Don't be *tope nephrosune*, as the false teachers use it.

Then in chapter 3 verse 12, same word, he says, put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and loved, compassionate hearts, kindness, *tope nephrosune*. Don't be *tope nephrosune*, be *tope nephrosune*! Words are dumb things, but you're not dumb. You open your mouth and you use it in a context and bring content with clarity to it.

So before I can give a talk on the uncommon virtue of humility, I have to ask, according to whose usage and in what context? Now I'm going to answer that in just a moment, but before I do, here's another clarification about words. I have a love affair and a hate affair with words. When I'm trying to understand someone's use of a word in a context, I don't really care ultimately about the word.

I care about the reality they are trying to communicate by the word. My wife is named Noel with an umlaut over the e. It's a word and I care very little for that word. And I care ultimately about the reality it's naming, pointing to my wife, her person.

I don't care very much about the word L-O-V-E. I really don't. It's dumb.

It's empty. It's a word. I care ultimately about the reality how precious, how precious is her love for me.

I love reality. Words, they're friends and stubborn as can be. They let you down so often, especially in this day of media.

So to clarify, my aim in this talk is to communicate to you an understanding of the reality of the uncommon virtue of humility as communicated by God through inspired writers by the way they use words in several biblical contexts. That's a huge limitation. I'm after God's intention to communicate a reality to me through inspired writers in context rightly understood.

That's what I'm after. And to complicate matters for me, I'm going to commend to you a composite definition or description of the uncommon virtue of humility. I'm going to commend a composite definition as faithful, a hope of the reality according to inspired usage in several contexts.

Now this is really risky to say that's my goal, a composite definition from various contexts. It's risky because I'm drawing on really 50 years and dozens of texts. I'm drawing on what I've read all over the Bible about this reality that sometimes is named and sometimes it's not named that we're calling humility.

I'm drawing on that, which means I'm inviting you, so this is this is my little caveat lest you you absolutize what I'm saying, I'm inviting you to test this definition as you read all the texts about humility. And you to ask yourself, is that definition that Piper unfolded and defended, which we haven't named yet, is that definition the essence of this uncommon virtue, Christian virtue of humility, is what he said what makes it distinctly Christian in this context, in that context, and then you'll be able to discern whether my composite explanation or description is workable in various contexts. That's a gift for you to test.

So here's my definition. The uncommon virtue of humility is the disposition of the heart to be pleased with the infinite superiority of Christ over ourselves in every way. The disposition of our heart to be pleased with the infinite superiority of Christ over me and you in every way.

And, and I'll explain the and in just a minute, and while we still live in this fallen nature, sin nature in me, in you, while we still have this fallen sin nature, that very humility that I just defined that way includes the reflex of displeasure with all the remnants of old, mild preference for self-exaltation, with all of its insidious manifestations. So you got a definition and you got a reflex that belongs to the reality for now, while we're sinners still. Now notice carefully, I'm not defining humility primarily in terms of our response to our own self-exalting sinful nature.

I'm not defining it primarily in that negative way. I'm defining humility primarily in terms of our response to the superiority of Christ over us in every way. Our response to our sinful love of self-exaltation is a reflex of our awakening to the beautiful superiority of Christ, else it wouldn't be Christian.

The greater our pleasure in the superiority of Christ over us, the more sorrowful our awareness that there remains in us the ugliness of craving self-exaltation. The reason that's important to see and to stress is that someday we will be completely delivered of our love for self-exaltation. Won't that be a good day? We will be finally purified to sin no more, and in that day, when there's no sin whatsoever to humble us, we will still be humble.

That's why it's important to define it this way. Humility consists not essentially in brokenheartedness for preferring self-exaltation. Not essentially.

Necessarily. Reflexively. But not essentially.

Because in being pleased that Christ is infinitely superior to us in every way, we are humble forever. Forever. We will never cease to be thrilled that he's greater than we are.

That will be our joy forever. He's greater. I'm small.

He's big. That will be our joy forever, even when there's no sin and no competing affections to humble us. For now, it's there, and that's part of humility.

It won't be forever. Notice another thing about this definition. I'm not locating the essence of humility in the roots or the fruits of humility.

Those would be two other sermons, and they would be long. The roots of humility are the superiority of Christ and my spiritual perception of it with the eyes of my heart. That's foundational and root for this disposition to be glad in it.

See the difference? He is that. He is superior. And by grace, I've seen it.

And now humility is born. I'm glad to have it so. I'm pleased that he is exalted above me in every way.

That's the essence of humility, I'm arguing. The fruit of humility would also be another sermon, and that's the attitudes, words, actions that flow from being glad in the superiority of Christ and being brokenhearted because of my sinful bent to exalt myself. I'll give you an example of what I mean by this fruit, because I think this is—here's where our paths might go apart if I'm not careful.

Philippians 2, 3, very famous passage on humility. Paul says in verse 3 of Philippians 2, in humility, dative, probably a dative of instrument, something like that, in or by humility, count others more significant than yourselves. He doesn't equate that remarkable, amazing, Christ-like act of humbling yourself, going down, being self-denying, being sacrificial to serve other people who don't deserve it.

That's count them more significant, that is worthy of your Christ-like, humble, crucified service. That's not humility in its essence, that's the act of humility. He says do that in humility.

So I'm distinguishing the essence from the roots and the fruits, and between the fruits, which are gloriously beautiful when they are lived out, between the fruits and the roots there is this, the disposition of the heart to be pleased with the infinite superiority of Christ over ourselves in every way. Or it's the heart's gladness that Jesus is infinitely greater than we are. We're just so glad to have it so.

I hope you, maybe once a day, try this if you don't do it, once a day find a little private spot, get down on your knees, hold your hands out and say, I'm not God, and I'm glad. Just do that. It's a really good habit.

One more qualification, I mean just to say it again, I've said it already. The heart's gladness that Jesus is infinitely greater than we are in every way, mingled in this life, in this sinful life, mingled with the groaning that self-exaltation still competes for my affections. So, for now, in this life, the uncommon virtue of humility will always be a groaning gladness and a glad groaning.

You won't ever get beyond that till you're dead, or Jesus comes. Humility will always be glad in his superiority. It'll always be sad because I'm still competing with him for the throne.

You hate it, you kill it, and there he comes again. That warfare is a good sign, folks, it's a good sign. Don't panic.

Now let's turn to a couple of passages. We're gonna go to Isaiah chapter 2, so now it is—where did you get all that idea? Where did you know all that? You haven't even quoted the Bible hardly. Isaiah chapter 2. Now I know that, and I go to the Old Testament, and the prophet Isaiah in particular, this is not immediately about Jesus, right? And yet I've said that humility is being pleased with his superiority, and now I'm going to a non-Jesus text to put some foundation biblically under it.

I'm aware of that. What we need to see here is what God Almighty, the Father, who will become incarnate in Jesus, is up to in the world, right? What's he doing? What's it about? What's the point of everything? And how does that relate to pride and humility? Okay, that's where we are. We'll start at verse 8. Their land—he's talking to—this is a pronouncement of judgment upon Judah and a call to repentance.

Their land—you with me at verse 8?—their land is filled with idols. They bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. So man is humbled, and each one is brought low.

Do not forgive them. Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty. The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of man shall be humbled, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day.

Almost all my thoughts flowed from that text. Verse 12. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low against the cedars of Lebanon.

What took the trees? They've been used by men. We own cedars. We have the cedars.

Idiots. Against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low against the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up against the oaks of Bashan, against all the lofty mountains, against the uplifted hills, against every high tower, against every fortified wall, against all the ships of Tarshish, against all the beautiful craft you made with your fingers, and the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and here it is again, the Lord alone will be exalted in that day, and the idol shall utterly pass away, and the people shall enter the caves and the rocks and the holes in the ground from before the terror of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty when he rises to terrify the earth. Verse 20.

In that day, mankind will cast away their idols of silver and their gold, idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship to the moles and to the bats, to enter into the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliffs from before the terror of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty when he rises to terrify the earth. And I think verse 22 is really significant. Stop regarding man in whose nostrils his breath, for what account is he? I'm going to draw two inferences from this text.

Number one, God's purpose in the world is that his splendor and majesty be exalted as superior over all human power and beauty and manufacture and craft, and over all nature that man has used to exalt himself. That's the purpose of God, to be exalted in his splendor and majesty over everything as superior. Three times, verse 10, verse 19, verse 21, he refers to God's thrusting forward the splendor of his majesty.

Twice, verse 11, verse 18, he says the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. That's the purpose of God in creation and in history, to see the splendor of his majesty exalted above everyone and everything forever. First inference.

Second inference, the effect of that purpose. Verse 11 and verse 17, the haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled. And I think what we hear in verse 22 at the end is a cry that this punishment on pride is not the end of the story.

I think it's a verse saying that's not my ultimate point. My ultimate point is not to crush pride. My ultimate point is to restore humility.

Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for what account is he? In other words, be pleased by what your fingers can make. Be pleased with the splendor and the majesty of God. The Lord alone is going to be exalted.

Everything else is coming down. The haughtiness of man will be humbled. The lofty pride of men will be brought low.

Repent. Turn from your love affair with the work of your hands. Bemoan your arrogant idolatry.

The Lord alone is going to be exalted. Be pleased about that. Let that be your joy.

Let that be your treasure. Be pleased with his infinite superiority. Let this be your gladness, your boast.

Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. Now go with me to Philippians chapter 2. I'm gonna go to not the text you think I'm gonna go to, unless you're really clicking with me. I'm not going to 5 through 8. I'm going to 9 to 11.

Chapter 2, 9 to 11. Because what verses 9 to 11 do is describe that Jesus is now fulfilling that God alone will be exalted. God alone will be exalted.

Christ above every name, every knee down, Christ up over everything. See the connection? Let's read it. Verse 9. Therefore God has highly exalted him, Jesus the God-man, and bestowed on him a name that is above every name.

No exceptions. He's up, every name down. So that at the name of Jesus, every knee goes down.

Bows in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, superior, sovereign over everything. To the glory of God the Father. So God exalted Christ above every name.

Now that's shorthand, isn't it? For Isaiah chapter 2. The Lord alone will be exalted in that day. Christ is now exalted as Lord. Quoting an actual Isaiah text where Yahweh becomes Jesus.

Christ alone now, God alone will be exalted in that day. In the implications for man, every knee goes down. No exceptions.

Well if every knee goes down, who gets saved? Those who are glad to have it so. I'm going down. There's nothing I'd rather do than be down in front of that, that person.

Nothing I'd rather be than down on my knees acknowledging that all- satisfying supremacy over me in everything. That's who gets saved. And then in the next chapter, Paul says, chapter 3 verse 8, I count everything as lost because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, my superior in everything.

It is my treasure to know Jesus as superior to me in everything. I love the Apostle Paul. I'm a Christian because of the Apostle Paul and Jesus.

No comparison. I'm almost finished. I hope you can sense how incredibly practical it is to say that the essence of the uncommon virtue of humility is to be pleased that he is our superior in every way.

When you start listing the superiorities and what you would be pleased with, he is superior to us in grace and mercy and love. He is infinitely superior to us in knowledge and wisdom. He is infinitely superior to us in power and governance.

He is infinitely superior to us in goodness and righteousness and holiness. He is infinitely superior to us in authority and freedom and penetrating all of those and more. He is infinitely superior to us in greatness and beauty and worth.

And what do we call that? We call it his glory. He is infinitely superior to us in glory. To have the uncommon virtue of humility is to see that glory and be pleased that is infinitely superior to yours.

And 2nd Corinthians 4 describes how that happens. Verse 4 through 6, the blindness of the devil is taken away and we see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, the infinite superiority of Christ in greatness and beauty and worth over us in every way. And then verse 7, after verses 4 through 6 describes how humility happens, verse 7 says, we have this treasure, this glad sight of the glory of Christ in jars of clay that the surpassing power might belong to God.

So in conclusion, I'm commending to you a definition of the uncommon virtue of humility for you to test. It's a composite definition. I want you to take it home.

And when you read texts about humility or about the reality of humility, ask, is that the essence of what is being spoken of? And is that what makes it distinctively Christian? The uncommon virtue of humility is the disposition of the heart to be pleased with the infinite superiority of Christ over ourselves in every way. It's the heart's gladness that Jesus is infinitely greater than we are, mingled in this life with the groaning that self-exaltation still competes for our affections. And if you long for this, and I assume that you do, if you long for this, beware of standing in front of the mirror, testing the authenticity of your humility, and instead go to the windows of the Word, and with everything you've learned and are learning in your classes, fling them open and behold our God.

That's why I told you, that's a good song. I'm glad you sang that song. That's a great song.

It is an all-satisfying gaze and a heartbreaking gaze while we still are so given to pride. Let's pray. I go back to John the Baptist now, Lord.

Beholding the bridegroom, he who hears the voice of the bridegroom rejoices that he's not the bridegroom. I'm not the bridegroom. I'm not the prophet.

I'm not the Messiah. And in his joy, he says, he must increase and I must decrease. Give us that kind of joy in your superiority, I pray.

In Jesus' name, amen.

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