

November 2023

Frank W. Nelte

IF WE ARE HUMBLE NOW: WILL WE STILL BE HUMBLE TOMORROW?

True humility is not always understood correctly.

When we don't like what someone else may say or do, or we don't like the opinions someone else may express, then we sometimes conclude: "**that person** is arrogant and **lacks humility**". And sometimes that assessment may be true, and at other times it may not be correct.

It is not uncommon at all for someone who claims that certain other people don't have any humility, for that "someone" himself or herself to lack humility. It is very common for people to accuse others of the very things that they themselves are guilty of. That is a very common trait of human nature. In politics we see this all the time ... that politicians themselves are guilty of the very things they accuse their opponents to be guilty of.

Here is an interesting test we could apply in such situations.

Someone rejects our opinions and our views. So we say that they lack humility. Okay, what if they now completely agree with all our views and opinions, and even discreetly praise our good ideas ... **will we still claim that they lack humility?**

No, of course not!

Hey, anyone who recognizes our good views and opinions is obviously also "a good guy", and certainly not lacking in humility. We never attribute a lack of humility to those people who like us, and who value our point of view. No, people like that are clearly humble people, right?

So when we in a Church of God context talk about people being either humble or else lacking humility, what is our assessment typically based on? In very many cases our assessment of "humility or no humility" is based on **whether or not people agree with our doctrinal ideas**.

That's the criterion we use all too frequently!

Has someone ever said to you: "**you just think that you are always right**, don't you"? How would you answer such an assertion? What is the person actually saying?

For a start, they are not saying what they really mean!

What they really are saying is: “I am upset because **I believe that I am right, and that you are wrong.**” But that would sound selfish, and so instead they try to make you look bad, by putting the focus on you. Their statement also says that they don’t have any clear logical points to refute the things you said, or they would surely present those logical points. It is because they have no way of refuting whatever you may have said, that they instead change the focus away from the matter under discussion to **a focus on your personality** and/or character.

One suitable response to the “you just think that you are always right” assertion is to say: “Okay, **what’s the alternative** to me being right? Is the alternative you are implying that **you** are right? **Why** should you be right? **What facts** support you being right? **What qualifications** do you have for the subject under discussion?”

With these comments you are putting the focus back on the other person. Now they have to defend themselves. And they will surely think twice before again accusing you of believing that you are always right.

The truth is that **every single one of us** thinks every single time, at least initially, that we are right in the things we say. Otherwise we wouldn’t say them. But when there is a conflict of opinions or ideas, then both parties cannot be right.

But such situations don’t necessarily have anything to do with humility or a lack of humility. The person whose opinion is wrong isn’t necessarily humble, and the person whose opinion is right doesn’t necessarily lack humility. A difference in views and opinions is not a criterion in establishing the presence or absence of humility.

So what is humility?

HUMILITY DEFINED

Dictionaries commonly define the word “humility” as: “the **feeling or attitude** that **you have no special importance** that makes you better than others; the opposite of pride”. Or they may define it as: “a modest or **low view of one's own importance**, humbleness”.

Those definitions are fine. But reference works may at times also misapply the word “humility”. Thus I found one example, presented without any context, for using the word “humility” on the internet that reads as follows:

“He needs **the humility to accept that their way may be better**”.

This is **a misapplication** of the word “humility”!

What this sentence does is apply the word “humility” to a subject that requires a “right or wrong” answer. But without further qualifications “right or wrong” has nothing to do with humility. Thus for the above sentence:

Are there **any facts**, or is there **any evidence** that “their way may be better”? For example: “their way” may be an open border policy for anyone to enter the country without restrictions, while “his way” is to restrict entries to only those who come through the legal channels. In this situation **emphatically rejecting “their way”** of an open border has nothing at all to do with “lacking humility”.

When we can clearly see that something is wrong, that something will produce very undesirable results, then even the most humble person should **resolutely reject** the way that will produce bad results, the way that is wrong.

Now if it can be explained or demonstrated with facts that “their way may be better”, **then** if “he” still insists on his way anyway, then he may indeed lack humility. This is commonly the case with certain leaders, who reject good sound advice in favor of sticking with their own uninformed bad opinions.

[As an aside: I suppose the only good thing about dictators often rejecting good advice and sticking with their own flawed ideas, is that often their own bad judgment will more quickly lead to their downfall. If they followed good advice, they might just stay in power longer, which would not be good.]

But without any qualifications, the statement “he needs **the humility** to accept that their way may be better” represents a misapplication of the word “humility”.

However, we should recognize that very many people would accept that sentence, without any qualifications, as a valid use of the word “humility”, as did the person who wrote that statement on the internet post that I read. That sentence is an illustration of people claiming that someone who has a **different opinion** somehow “lacks humility”. He may lack humility, or he may just have a better-informed opinion.

When it comes to right-or-wrong, when it comes to a better course of action, then **the facts** of the matter are the first deciding factor, as far as humility is concerned. The side of the argument which then represents the right or better way, that side’s view has nothing to do with lacking humility one way or the other. But the side that represents the wrong way, the way that is discredited by the facts, and still demands consideration, that side may well have the problem of a lack of humility.

THE EXAMPLE OF MOSES

During Israel’s 40 years of wandering through the wilderness more than one rebellion was directed against Moses and Aaron. In one instance the leaders of a specific rebellion were Korah, a Levite, and Dathan and Abiram, men of the tribe of Reuben. The account of this rebellion is recorded in Numbers 16.

Notice verse 3.

And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, **you take too much upon you**, seeing all the congregation *are* holy, every one of them, and the LORD *is* among them: wherefore then **lift you up yourselves above the congregation** of the LORD? (Numbers 16:3)

The statement “you take too much upon you” claims that Moses was presumptuous and arrogant, and that therefore **he obviously was not humble**. That’s the accusation.

Now Moses didn’t mince words. He didn’t say things like: well, you may be right and I may be wrong, but here’s what I think ..., etc. No, Moses spoke directly and bluntly; and in dealing with religious matters **he spoke dogmatically**, with no allowance for his views being wrong, and other people being right.

But can someone who is truly humble speak like that? Moses’ way of dealing with the people was not anything like the way in which modern people commonly understand the word “humble”. He spoke with authority, something you supposedly can’t do if you are truly humble. And so some of the people accused Moses of not being humble, to put it mildly.

So here is the point.

Let’s look again at the definition for the word “humility”. Humility is “the **feeling or attitude** that you have no special importance”. Humility is a frame of mind, a way of thinking, a way of realizing that we are not more important than anyone else.

But that way of viewing self has nothing to do with “what is **the right answer** to this question?”, and with “what is **the best course of action** for us to now take?”. To insist in any discussion that “two plus two is four” is not an expression of arrogance; and it is not a lack of humility. Why? Because any claim that two plus two is anything other than four is a denial of the truth. And **insisting** that two plus two is equal to four does not mean that the person who emphatically defends this fact somehow has an attitude of being special or more important than other people. Those two things are totally unrelated.

So Moses was right, because God had chosen him for that specific responsibility, and his accusers were wrong. Moses had not in any way elevated himself above anybody. And the way Moses carried out the responsibilities God had given him in no way implied that Moses was somehow not humble. Let’s keep in mind that Moses hadn’t actually wanted the job.

At the earlier occasion, when Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses for a marriage Moses had entered at some point in the first 40 years of his life (see Numbers 12:1), when he was still a part of Egyptian royalty, we have the following statement:

Now **the man Moses was very meek**, above all the men which *were* upon the face of the earth. (Numbers 12:3)

At that point in time Moses in fact had more humility than anyone else. Since Moses wrote this book of Numbers, how do we know that this statement is true? How can we know that Moses wasn't just praising himself with this statement?

We can know that this is absolutely true by the things that follow this statement. We can know this is true from the things that God Himself then said about Moses. God said to Aaron and Miriam:

And He said, Hear now My words: If there be a prophet among you, / the LORD will make Myself known unto him in a vision, *and* will speak unto him in a dream. **My servant Moses *is not so***, who *is* faithful in all My house. (Numbers 12:6-7)

The expression "My servant Moses is not so" means: "that's not how I deal with Moses. Moses has a **closer relationship** with Me than any other prophet, because Moses is absolutely faithful to Me. Moses is different".

The next verse explains:

With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses? (Numbers 12:8)

The statement "with him will I speak mouth to mouth" was emphatically fulfilled during the two periods of 40 days that Moses spent up on the mountain with God.

Now God hates pride and arrogance. And God's statement about Moses in this verse makes clear that Moses was certainly not proud or arrogant. God's statement makes clear that Moses was indeed more humble than any other person.

Yet many of the people of Israel didn't see it that way. And many people in our world today wouldn't see it that way either. They wouldn't view Moses as an extremely humble man. That's because Moses doesn't fit in with this world's fake humility.

Now let's examine some biblical statements.

WHAT THE BIBLE TELLS US

The fear of the LORD *is* the instruction of wisdom; and **before honor *is* humility**. (Proverbs 15:33)

The Hebrew word here correctly translated as "humility" is "anavah", and it refers to being meek and

poor in spirit. True humility is an absolutely essential requirement for establishing any relationship with God.

When God is clearly using any man or woman to do His work, then that is evidence that the person is indeed humble. The only exception here is when God forces someone against their own will to do His work (e.g. Jonah), in which case the person will clearly lack humility. But anyone who willingly and gladly performs all God-given responsibilities is clearly a humble person, because God will simply not choose to work through **people who are proud**.

So when shortly before Jesus Christ's second coming **the two witnesses** fulfill the job God will give them, they will of necessity be very humble individuals, as far as God is concerned. People will die at their word (Revelation 11:5), and they will pronounce plagues on the earth (verse 6), actions that hardly anyone today would associate with humility. But in the sight of God they will both be very humble men. They will not think of themselves as special or better than other people. They will be focused on doing the job God will give them.

And ultimately they will both submit to being put to death. And, as Proverbs 15:33 tells us, their humility will lead to later receiving honor from God (see Revelation 11:11-12).

This statement about humility is repeated a few chapters later.

Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and **before honor is humility**. (Proverbs 18:12)

"Haughty" refers to pride and vanity. And "destruction" refers to being broken. Humility is the opposite of pride. What this verse tells us is that true humility means that **the human spirit has to be broken**. The spirit of pride and vanity and selfishness has to be broken, and then we can become humble.

The only other place where the word "humility" appears in the Old Testament of the KJV is Proverbs 22:4.

By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, and honor, and life. (Proverbs 22:4)

Without humility we cannot have the right fear of God. And without the fear of God we cannot have true humility. These two ways of using our minds must always go together. And when our thinking is grounded on these two attributes, then God will bless us in various ways.

One Scripture that sums this up is Isaiah 66:2.

For all those *things* has My hand made, and all those *things* have been, says the LORD: but to this *man* will I look, *even to him that is poor* and of **a contrite spirit**, and **trembles** at My word. (Isaiah 66:2)

Here “poor” refers to “**humble**”, “a contrite spirit” refers to “**a repentant spirit**”, and “trembles” refers to “**having the fear of God**”. These three attributes all refer to how we use our free minds. And none of them represent any feelings of insecurity. None of them imply that we would not firmly insist that “two plus two is equal to four”, for fear of perhaps not being humble. These three things are the attributes God is looking for in you and in me.

Another perspective of humility is presented in Micah 6:8.

He hath showed you, O man, what *is* good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to **do justly**, and to **love mercy**, and to **walk humbly** with your God? (Micah 6:8)

The expression “to walk humbly” is a reference to how we conduct our lives, how we live. It is not a reference to our literal way of walking. “To do justly” means that we try our best to live by all of God’s laws, and that we seek to please God. “To love mercy” means that we have an outgoing concern for the well-being of other people, and are readily willing to overlook and forgive others who have wronged us.

This verse shows us what living God’s way is supposed to look like in practical terms. Walking humbly with God means that we eagerly seek to understand the mind of God, and eagerly seek to implement all of God’s ways in our daily lives. This verse spells out what life during the millennium is intended to look like.

Now a question comes up:

If we are indeed humble right now, at this stage of our lives, does that ensure that we will also be humble for the rest of our lives? Or **could we lose the humility we have right now?**

Let’s look at some biblical examples.

KING SAUL

When God selected Saul to be the king of Israel, Saul was a very humble man. He had a humble opinion of his own worth. Samuel said to Saul:

... And on whom *is* all the desire of Israel? ***Is it not on you***, and on all your father’s house? (1 Samuel 9:20)

This was extremely high praise for a farm boy from Benjamin. And Saul felt embarrassed by this praise. He was uncomfortable with being told that all Israel desired him to be the nation’s leader. So Saul’s spontaneous response was:

And Saul answered and said, *Am* not I a Benjamite, of **the smallest** of the tribes of Israel? and my family **the least of all the families** of the tribe of Benjamin? **wherefore then speak you so to me?** (1 Samuel 9:21)

At that point in time Saul had no ambitions of any kind, and he was truly humble. Later, when Samuel called the people together to Mizpeh, God was going to reveal to the people whom God had chosen to be the king. The selection process went through all the tribes. It went as follows:

When he (Samuel) had caused the tribe of Benjamin to come near by their families, the family of Matri was taken, and **Saul the son of Kish was taken**: and when they sought him, **he could not be found**. (1 Samuel 10:21)

Having already been anointed by Samuel (1 Samuel 10:1), Saul realized that he was the one who would be selected. And he was scared. So he just went and hid, hoping that someone else would then be selected. Saul was clearly still very humble; he didn't think of himself as special or better than others.

So God told the people where Saul was hiding (verse 22), and then the people accepted Saul as king.

We might note a mistranslation in this context. Where the KJV for 1 Samuel 10:24 reads "**God save the king**", the Hebrew text reads "yechi hammelech". These Hebrew words basically mean "**may the king live**".

Various translations have corrected this mistranslation. For example:

ASV reads: "... *long* live the king", with "long" in italics.

DARBY reads: "... may the king live".

YOUNG'S Literal Translation reads: "... let the king live".

NRSV reads: "... long live the king".

WORLD ENGLISH BIBLE reads: "let the king live".

LEESER O.T. reads: "... long live the king".

JPS reads: "... long live the king". etc.

The point here is this: It is well known that the Hebrew text does not contain a word for "God", and neither is there any word for "save". Also the Hebrew does not contain a word for "long", though "long" could perhaps be inferred from their jubilantly shouted statement. But **there is no appeal to God in this statement**. The people had just rebelled against God in asking for a king. And so the people did not actually appeal to God with this statement.

The mistranslation “God save the king” was intended to flatter King James, to whom the KJV translation was dedicated. But this expression is not a faithful translation of the Hebrew text.

Anyway, Saul then went back home (verse 26). And **he continued to work with the cattle** in his father’s fields (1 Samuel 11:5). He was still humble even after the people had accepted him as king.

Fast forward several years.

When Saul was faced with a superior Philistine army, and when Samuel seemed to not come as had been agreed, Saul acted very presumptuously and performed a burnt offering to God (see 1 Samuel 13:9). In so doing he was usurping the priest’s responsibility. He was no longer humble. Instead, he was now concerned with justifying his presumptuous actions.

After that God instructed Saul to kill all the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:3). Once again Saul disobeyed God, by saving Agag, the king of the Amalekites, as well as all the best breeding animals amongst the sheep and cattle. When confronted by Samuel, Saul once again attempted to justify himself, something that is always a telltale sign that the person lacks humility. **Self-justification**, when we are guilty, **is evidence of a lack of humility**.

The lesson from Saul’s life:

The man started out very humble. That is when God selected him. Once he had become accustomed to his status as king, he lost that humility. Instead, Saul became very concerned about his image before the people. This concern is evident from the occasion when Samuel confronted him. On that occasion, after a severe chewing-out by Samuel, Saul eventually said:

Then he said, I have sinned: **yet honor me now**, I pray you, **before the elders of my people, and before Israel**, and turn again with me, that I may worship the LORD your God. (1 Samuel 15:30)

Saul was concerned about what the people might think of him. His original humility had disappeared completely. And so God rejected Saul and chose David in his place.

So simply because someone is humble right now, that is no guarantee that he will still be humble 10 years from now. This is where Paul’s admonition ties in.

Wherefore let **him that thinks he stands** take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12)

In other words, we must always be on guard against entertaining any wrong attitudes. Pride, the opposite of humility, is always going to be a serious temptation for us, specifically when things are going well, when we are successful, and when we achieve major accomplishments. That’s when the pressure against remaining humble will be the greatest. That’s when we need to recognize our own weaknesses

and frailties most vividly. As Paul said:

But I keep under my body, and bring *it* into subjection: **lest** that by any means, when I have preached to others, **I myself should be a castaway**. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

When Paul had preached to people, when he could see people coming to repentance in response to his preaching, that's when he was accomplishing the most. And that was also when he was in the greatest danger of becoming proud and letting humility slip away from him. So Paul made a point of being very disciplined, when it came to how he would use his mind, since it is the mind that controls the body.

We must watch over our minds, and be on guard when wrong thoughts suddenly appear, as it were out of nowhere. This we have to do till the day we die.

But **he that shall endure unto the end**, the same shall be saved. (Matthew 24:13)

Let's look at another example.

KING SOLOMON

When David died, his son Solomon was a teenager, probably around age 14 years. God then appeared to Solomon in a dream.

In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, **Ask what I shall give you**. (1 Kings 3:5)

Solomon did not make any selfish request. Instead, Solomon asked for an understanding mind, so that he might wisely rule over the people of Israel.

And now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king instead of David my father: and **I am but a little child: I know not *how* to go out or come in**. (1 Kings 3:7)

A more suitable translation for the expression "I am but a child" is "**I am only a teenager**". With the expression "I know not how to go out or come in" Solomon was saying "I have no experience in leadership, and **I don't know how to wisely rule over Your people**".

Solomon here expressed a great deal of humility. He was asking God to show him how to be a good king; he was asking for understanding and discernment (verse 9). We might note that Solomon didn't ask for wisdom; he only asked for discernment.

God was impressed with Solomon's genuine humility.

And **the speech pleased the Lord**, that Solomon had asked this thing. (1 Kings 3:10)

At the start of his reign Solomon was extremely humble before God.

Fast forward to the latter part of Solomon's 40-year reign.

For it came to pass, **when Solomon was old**, *that* his wives turned away his heart **after other gods**: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as *was* the heart of David his father. For Solomon went **after Ashtoreth** the goddess of the Zidonians, and **after Milcom** the abomination of the Ammonites. And **Solomon did evil** in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as *did* David his father. (1 Kings 11:4-6)

In his old age Solomon was weak, giving in to the demands of all his foreign wives. He got involved in pagan religions. Thus "Solomon did evil". **Solomon was no longer humble!** His humility had left him when he started to accumulate countless wives. Solomon even built pagan shrines and altars for his foreign wives, right there in the Jerusalem area (verses 7-8).

The result was:

And **the LORD was angry with Solomon**, because his heart was turned from the LORD God of Israel, who had appeared unto him twice, (1 Kings 11:9)

That was the time of Solomon's life when he then wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes, a pessimistic assessment of gloom and doom, as far as the value of human life is concerned. It is the most negative book in the Bible. **Solomon knew** that he had messed up his life, and that he would miss out on salvation, and he reflects that knowledge in Ecclesiastes. Solomon was speaking about himself when he said:

Better *is* a poor and a wise child than **an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished**. (Ecclesiastes 4:13)

The facts are that we find it much harder to accept correction in old age than in our childhood. Solomon was the "old and foolish king". He was here acknowledging that he had gone beyond the point of being willing to listen to correction. And while Solomon had originally had great wisdom and understanding, he recognized that **the decisions he had made**, made him "a foolish king".

Towards the end of his life he was simply no longer prepared to change. That decision was the result of his hedonistic lifestyle (see Ecclesiastes 2:1-10). His admission that "whatsoever my eyes desired, I kept not from them" tells us that Solomon had not exercised any self-restraint whatsoever. Solomon was

the ultimate hedonist!

It is no surprise that God was angry with Solomon.

The lesson from Solomon's life:

It is not enough to be humble in our youth. We have to maintain that humility for the rest of our lives. And once we achieve some status or recognition, then **the temptation to become vain and proud** (i.e. the opposite of humility) **increases exponentially**. The feeling "it doesn't matter what happens ... from now on I am not going to change any more" becomes greater as we achieve success.

In our youth we were willing to make all kinds of changes in our lives. But now in our old age we can easily become reluctant to make further changes. That is what we then need to guard against. If something wrong is pointed out to us, we must be willing to change, whether we are young or old. That is what God requires of us.

In a sense, Solomon is like someone who has grown up in the Church, and faithfully kept all of God's laws until middle age. And then the person reached a point where they believe that they have all of the truth, and therefore there will be no further demands on them to make some changes. So they become resistant to change.

Let's look at another example.

KING UZZIAH

Uzziah became king at the age of 16 years (2 Chronicles 26:3). This was another humble teenager. He reigned for 52 years in Jerusalem. He did his best to obey God.

And **he did *that which was right*** in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah did. **And he sought God** in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God: and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him to prosper. (2 Chronicles 26:4-5)

Uzziah humbly responded to all the teaching and guidance he received from the Prophet Zechariah (not the same man as the prophet in the Book of Zechariah). And God helped Uzziah against the Philistines (verse 7).

Fast forward to the latter part of his long reign. By then Uzziah was well established in his kingship, and his mentor Zechariah had died.

That's when Uzziah was no longer humble. By then pride had replaced humility in Uzziah's life. Notice:

But **when he was strong, his heart was lifted up** to *his* destruction: for **he transgressed** against the LORD his God, and went into the temple of the LORD to burn incense upon the altar of incense. (2 Chronicles 26:16)

He already had the status of being the king, the secular leader in the nation. But he was no longer humble. He now also wanted to perform religious duties that were restricted to the priests alone.

So Uzziah acted presumptuously, a sure indicator that **he was no longer humble**.

So the High Priest Azariah and 80 other priests followed the king into the Temple, and confronted him regarding his presumptuousness (verses 17-18). Being denied the ability to do what he had intended to do infuriated the king. That's when God intervened and struck Uzziah with leprosy.

Then Uzziah was wrath, and *he had* a censer in his hand to burn incense: and **while he was wrath** with the priests, **the leprosy even rose up in his forehead** before the priests in the house of the LORD, from beside the incense altar. (2 Chronicles 26:19)

Once he realized that God had struck him with leprosy, Uzziah himself hastened out of the Temple (verse 20). And the result of this one time presumptuousness was that Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death.

And **Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death**, and dwelt in a several house, *being* a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the LORD: and Jotham his son *was* over the king's house, judging the people of the land. (2 Chronicles 26:21)

A lesson for us: When we face troubles we know that we need God to help us. In those situations it is not difficult to recognize our own inadequacies, and our desperate need for God's help. But when things go well for us, when we prosper, then we don't recognize our need for God's help with our lives quite so readily. And that is when it is easy for pride to replace humility in our minds.

Uzziah was basically a good king for most of his life. But his status and his prosperity went to his head, and that's when he ceased to be humble. The same can easily happen to us. **When we are self-sufficient** and when everything is going well for us, **that's when we are most vulnerable** to be tempted to become proud, and to cease being humble. That's when we are most likely to think of ourselves "more highly than we ought to think" (see Romans 12:3). Or, as Job put it, "I was at ease" ... when all my troubles came upon me (see Job 16:12).

Therefore, **we need to be especially vigilant "when we are at ease"**. Why? Because that is when we are tempted the most to rely on our own powers and resources.

Let's look at another man.

THE JUDGE GIDEON

When Gideon was secretly threshing wheat, to avoid being seen by any Midianites, an angel appeared to him (Judges 6:11-12). The angel told Gideon “you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites” (verse 14). To this Gideon replied:

And he said unto him, Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, **my family is poor** in Manasseh, and **I am the least in my father’s house**. (Judges 6:15)

Once again we are dealing with a very humble individual. Gideon did not think highly of himself. Anyway, we all know the story. God was with him and gave him a great victory over the Midianites.

Now once Gideon had victoriously concluded the warfare against the Midianites, he made a request to his soldiers.

And Gideon said unto them, **I would desire a request of you, that you would give me every man the earrings of his prey**. (For they had golden earrings, because they *were* Ishmaelites.) And they answered, We will willingly give *them*. And they spread a garment, and did cast therein every man the earrings of his prey. (Judges 8:24-25)

Here Gideon collected millions of dollars worth of gold. That seems rather selfish. Gideon was the general who had led them to a mighty victory, and so the men all willingly gave him all the gold that he had asked for, in total **1,700 shekels of gold** (verse 26).

Why did he want all the gold?

Gideon wanted the gold **to build a pagan shrine in his hometown**, which became a tourist attraction, to which Israelites made religious pilgrimages.

And **Gideon made an ephod thereof**, and put it in his city, *even* in Ophrah: and **all Israel went thither a whoring after it**: which thing became **a snare unto Gideon**, and to his house. (Judges 8:27)

After his resounding victory Gideon was no longer humble, was he? An angel of God had actually appeared to him, and not long after that Gideon builds a pagan shrine. What happened to all that humility? Building a pagan shrine? In success Gideon’s “heart was lifted up”, similar to what later happened to Uzziah.

Yes, Gideon had stopped Baal worship in Israel, but he had not turned people back to the true God of Israel. Instead of Baal worship, Gideon offered people the shrine he had made from the 1,700 shekels of gold. That wasn’t much better than Baal worship. And so as soon as Gideon had died, the people of

Israel predictably all went back to Baal worship once again (Judges 8:32-33).

Once again it was a God-given victory that caused the victorious leader (i.e. in this instance Gideon) to replace humility with pride. Gideon promptly got himself “many wives”, plus a concubine in Shechem for his away-from-home trips (Judges 8:30-31). He had 70 sons from all these wives, 69 of whom were later killed by the son of this away-from-home concubine. A sad ending for the story of Gideon.

Right, we have now considered four different men, three kings and one Judge. All of them started out with great humility when God first began to work with them. And all of them were blessed by God with success in what they were expected to do (for Saul it was only initial success, because of his subsequent disobedience). And **all four of them lost the humility** they had initially possessed.

The point is: all four of them **could have stayed humble** for the rest of their lives. They were free moral agents. And God was on their side. But all of them lost their humility in their later years.

Let’s look at some instructions in the New Testament.

INSTRUCTIONS REGARDING HUMILITY

While in prison in Rome, Paul encouraged the members in Ephesus to faithfully live the Christian life. In chapter 4 he said:

With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; (Ephesians 4:2)

The Greek word translated as “lowliness” is the word for humility. It refers to “lowliness of mind”, i.e. not thinking of self as better than other people. Paul shows that humility must be a major part of the Christian character. Since humility is contrary to human nature, therefore we must actively strive to make humility a part of our character. It takes conscious effort to respond with humility to every situation that confronts us.

Let nothing *be done* through strife or vainglory; but **in lowliness of mind** let each esteem other better than themselves. (Philippians 2:3)

The expression “esteem other better than themselves” refers to how we look at the person involved. It is not a reference to how we look at their skills, abilities or talents. We don’t have to think that other people somehow “know more than we do” in an area where we are highly qualified, and where they have no skills or training at all.

This verse is not a statement about how much we know or are able to do. It is a statement about **the value other people have in the eyes of God**. This is a statement about how we are to view other members of God’s Church. And in dealing with fellow-members of God’s Church, we should always

have the perspective that those other church members may well have a higher standing before God than we have. That should motivate us to treat all church members with respect.

Likewise, you younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yes, all *of you* be subject one to another, and **be clothed with humility**: for God resists the proud, and gives grace to **the humble**. (1 Peter 5:5)

Clothing is not a part of us. Clothing is something that we consciously have to put on, because it is not an automatic part of us. And humility is likewise something we have to put on. We have to consciously embrace humility. Then God will help us with all our trials.

A FALSE HUMILITY

But there is also a counterfeit humility. And that is something we need to guard against.

Let no man beguile you of your reward in **a voluntary humility** and worshipping of angels (i.e. demons, fallen angels), intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, (Colossians 2:18)

Paul mentions this false humility again a few verses later.

Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in **will worship**, and **humility**, and **neglecting of the body**; not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh. (Colossians 2:23)

“A voluntary humility” is a fake humility. And that fake humility commonly manifests itself in “will worship” and in “neglecting of the body”, something that is common in certain eastern religions. The world does not understand the difference between real humility and fake humility. And so the world accepts a fake humility in place of real humility. So let’s identify the differences between these two frames of mind.

Real humility is never visible to other people until something has happened, until something has been said or done. There is absolutely no way that we can tell whether or not someone is humble simply by looking at them. Humility does not have “a specific look about it”. **Real humility is always only reactive!** In other words, real humility is **always a response** to something that has been said or done. Real humility is never proactive; it is never visible in advance of something being said or done.

Real humility cannot be identified by the way people dress, or by the way people speak, or by the way they walk, or by the way they express their opinions, etc. And real humility is **never** identified by people saying “**in my humble opinion** ...”. If those people didn’t tell us that their opinions were humble, we certainly would never know it! That expression is a major identifier of fake humility.

Fake humility is typically **outwardly visible** to other people. Fake humility is in most cases **proactive**. Fake humility is evident before anything has been said or done. Fake humility doesn’t need anything to

be said or done for fake humility to manifest itself. Fake humility is commonly focused on “**will worship**” and on “**neglecting of the body**”.

In the expression “a **voluntary** humility” the Greek word for “voluntary” is “thelo” (i.e. “thelon” in the text). “Thelo” expresses a **personal wish or desire**. In other words, the Greek text for the expression “a voluntary humility” really means “**a humility that expresses a personal desire**”; it represents something that the person wants to have, even when nothing has been said or done to solicit any kind of response. The humility that “expresses a personal desire” is always proactive; it is present before there is any cause or justification for expressing humility.

Fake humility involves “will worship”, like people intentionally suffering in some way. And it involves “a neglecting of the body”, like people deliberately shunning good food and pleasant housing and pleasant clothing, etc.

So people who engage in this fake humility can often be identified by the “humble” **clothing** they wear, and by the “humble” way that they **walk**, and by the “humble” way that they **talk**, and by the “humble” **accommodation** they choose to live in, and by the “humble” **diet** they choose to follow, and by the “humble” way they **groom their hair**. Everything about them oozes fake humility. And that is Satan’s version of “humility”.

For such people it is a matter of “will worship” because they choose to live and behave that way. None of those ways are pleasing to God, let alone encouraged by God.

No, all those ways are **intended to impress other people**; they are intended to be visible representations of supposed “humility”. But as God tells us in Zechariah 13:4, false religious leaders “wear a rough garment to deceive us”, by implying humility. So when we are dealing with people who have all these outward trappings of a fake humility, then psychologically we are expected to defer to such “humble” people. They are supposedly on a morally higher level than we are.

In actual fact, “false humility” is just a synonym for “**vanity**”.

So let’s be clear that true humility is not some outwardly identifiable trait. True humility is an expression of how a person’s mind functions, how the person sees self in relation to God, and as a consequence, how the person treats all other people. And true humility can only be identified once a person responds to what has happened, or what has been said or done.

True humility is always an expression of a response to something that has happened. Before then it had not been possible to identify humility in that particular person. It is the response to something that will reveal humility or a lack of humility.

Never be impressed by “will worship” or by those who “neglect the body”. Remember that we are instructed to “**glorify God in our body** and in our spirit” (see 1 Corinthians 6:20). That’s the opposite of “neglecting the body”, and this therefore exposes “neglecting the body” as fake humility. Never be

impressed by a humility that is presented for all the world to see, but without needing any antecedent for that “humility” to become observable.

So much for fake humility. Let's summarize what we've covered.

IN SUMMARY

It is common for people to misunderstand true humility. Humility has nothing to do with being right or wrong on some issue. And when people disagree with our understanding, then that doesn't mean that they must therefore lack humility.

True humility is a feeling or attitude that we are not better than other people, that other people are no less important to God than we are. It is the opposite of being proud of anything. So anyone who tells us that he is proud of ... (whatever he may have achieved or done), that person cannot at the same time be humble. Pride and humility are mutually exclusive.

True humility cannot be identified by outward appearances. To be clear here: **pride can indeed be identified by outward appearances**, by the way people speak, and live and conduct themselves. But humility, the opposite of pride, is not identified by the absence of the outward indicators of pride. **Outward appearance can never identify true humility.**

True humility only reveals itself by **the way we respond** to something that has happened, or to something that has been said. As an illustration of this point, it was **how the Canaanite woman responded** to Jesus Christ's statement “it is not fit to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs” (see Matthew 15:26-28) that revealed both her faith and her humility. But when there is nothing to react to, then true humility is also not discernable.

The world around us is filled with **fake humility**. Fake humility is readily on display even when there is nothing that people could respond to. Fake humility is proactive, **visible in advance** of any situation that could potentially solicit a humble response. It reveals itself in the way people walk and talk and dress and speak and groom themselves, etc. It is a form of will worship, to use the Apostle Paul's expression.

We need to guard against all forms of this fake humility.

But in addition, we also need to recognize that people who really are truly humble right now, may not be humble tomorrow. We looked at three different kings in Israel, and one Judge, who all started out with great humility, but who all later lost that humility. And **the most common cause for a loss of humility is success**. It is when people become rich or powerful or popular that pride becomes a serious temptation. And obviously, success is not the only cause for the loss of humility.

Now the antidote to success going to our heads and making us feel important is to recognize that **all success is only due to God** giving us the powers and the ability to be successful. We need to fully

accept what Jesus Christ spelled out in plain words.

Then answered Jesus and said ... **the Son can do nothing of Himself** ... (John 5:19)

I can of My own self do nothing ... (John 5:30)

I am the vine ... for **without Me you can do nothing**. (John 15:5)

“Success” typically involves “having done something”. Now Jesus Christ Himself did many, many mighty works. But He always kept that in the right perspective. He made very clear that everything He achieved was due to the power and the abilities which God the Father gave Him.

Now it is not just a matter of freely acknowledging that everything we achieve is due to the power God makes available to us. **It is a matter of fully believing this** when we are totally on our own, when there is nobody else, to whom we could say these words. It is a matter of freely acknowledging this in our private prayers to God.

Jesus Christ freely said this about Himself in John 5. And ten chapters later He said the same thing about all of us. This conviction is the most important antidote to pride.

So we need to earnestly strive to respond with humility, both to success and to criticism. And we always need to be on guard against pride. Temptations to become proud will confront us when we least expect them, when our guard may be down. So therefore we can never let our guard down. We must always be on guard, so we are ready to retain true humility.

Frank W Nelte