

THE GREAT DESCENT

Our concrete basement floor is covered by a Berber carpet. We love the texture and looks of the Berber. It turns cold cement into a warm inviting space. I only have one complaint: it unravels. On a seam by the bathroom door a vacuum cleaner brush grabbed a thread and pulled it loose. Keep pulling that loose thread and the carpet keeps coming apart. Loose threads have to be cut off. With Berber, one loose thread can ruin the whole carpet.

You can ruin good character the same way. Godly character is a tightly woven fabric of Christlike virtues that are mutually reinforcing. Temptations are like loose threads – points of vulnerability. Tug at any of the individual strands and you risk unraveling the whole.

For instance, tell a lie and you unravel integrity. Trust falls apart. Love unravels with it, because a lie is always chosen to protect the imperial self. And should someone expose the lie, anger rises to meet the threat.

The consequence of sin is more sin. Pull at any loose moral thread and you always unravel more than you ever imagined.

Some threads, when pulled, do more damage to the fabric of character than others. For instance, Greek scholar Richard Trench called humility the "...treasure house in which all the other graces are contained." Tug at humility and what a host of failures unravels. No wonder Solomon observed: "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

Pastor Rick Warren was interviewed on NPR's *Speaking of Faith* this morning. Host Krista Tippett asked Rick, "You are known as America's pastor. What spiritual temptations or compromises come with that kind of national prominence?"

Pastor Warren said whenever he asks people to pray for him he asks for three things: integrity, generosity and humility. These protect him, he says, from the temptations of passion, possessions, and position: the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; the temptation to feel; temptation to have [greed]; temptation to be – I want people to worship me, envy me.

Pride is a loose thread for all of us. That's why godly humility is properly basic to good character. Both Paul and Peter urge us to clothe ourselves with humility.

Godly humility is also perhaps one of the least understood virtues. Satan knows where to keep us in the dark. In the world in which the New Testament came into being, humility was not prized. To the ancient Greeks and Romans humility was the identical twin of humiliation. In their minds, a humble person lacked spirit; they saw him as groveling, having a lean soul that led to weakness and timidity. The Greco-Roman world exalted something they called great-soul-ness. Humility didn't register in their definition of a great soul.

We have a similar problem. Humility is something we value chiefly in others. We want an enlarged self because self – the exaltation of me – is at the heart of sin. We also want an enlarged self because inside our truest selves, we feel small, inferior, and inadequate. So we gather to our souls possessions, achievements, honors, and relationships that make us, we hope, more attractive, more significant. We covet beauty, strength, money and power. We want these things as badges of worth that say to our world: "Notice me; like me, accept me."

All of these things are loose threads, tugging at the fabric of humility.

We mostly don't get humility. One writer defined humility as making ourselves small *even when we are great*. That's a little like the guy who said: "Sincerity is paramount. Once you can fake sincerity, you've got it made."

Humility is all about truth: truth about God and truth about us. Humility is not masking

our true greatness. That's arrogance in disguise.

The Apostle Paul said that if we want to understand humility, we have to understand what happened at Christmas – Phil. 2:5-8.

From the farthest reaches of eternity, from long before the foundations of the created universe, Jesus was forever and always “in very nature God.” Literally, in Paul’s words, Jesus had the *morphē* of Deity. We might say he had the morphology of Deity – God-form. Had we seen Jesus before his incarnation in Mary’s womb, we would have instinctively known that we were looking at God. Jesus had all the characteristics of what it meant to be Divine.

This past week presidential hopeful Mitt Romney gave a significant speech about the role of his Mormon faith in his life and on his candidacy. News commentators made much of Romney’s attempt to look presidential: he was introduced by a former president; the podium and the backdrop were dark blue; a row of American flags stood in order behind him; he wore a dark suit with a blue tie. He wanted us to look at him and see him in president-form.

Jesus possessed God-form. He was co-equal with the Father. It just doesn’t get any better than that.

But Jesus didn’t consider sharing equal glory with God as something so significant that he had to hang on to it for dear life. His form didn’t *determine* the essence of his being – it *expressed* his essence. The trappings of Deity didn’t define Jesus.

In the incarnation, Jesus “made himself nothing.” Scholars call this the *kenosis* passage from the Greek verb *kenoō* that Paul used to describe what Jesus did. *Kenoō* means to empty oneself, to divest oneself of all the privileges of rank and status. Jesus divested himself of God-form and took to himself servant form, human likeness. He emptied himself so thoroughly that at Christmas, he compacted deity into seven pounds of infant flesh.

“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

The humility of Jesus was the authentic outcome of the self-emptying of Jesus.

Our humility is the authentic outcome of our own self-emptying. Humility is possible only when we empty ourselves of that in which we wrap ourselves in order to feel OK about ourselves. Humility assumes servant-form.

Former President Jimmy Carter did that when he left the White House. He hung up his blue suits, grabbed a pair of jeans and strapped on a carpenter’s apron. When he could no longer wield power, he swung a hammer. He divested himself of the perks of being an ex-president so he could serve the homeless.

Humility.

How do we get there? How do we pull that off? How do we move from being self-focused and self-aggrandizing to assume the humble role of a servant?

My first step toward humility is when I realize that God is God and I am not. Humility is conceived in the awareness of my sinfulness against the backdrop of God’s holiness. Humility is born in repentance and faith, birthed at the foot of the cross. It is there I realize that Jesus absorbed into himself all about me that is wicked, broken and unacceptable – everything that alienates me from God – and in one stroke, Jesus nailed it to his cross. My life as a moral failure, disqualified for heaven, ends at the cross of Jesus. God accepts me because of what Jesus has done on my behalf. In the words of the old hymn:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless, look to Thee for grace.
Foul, I to the fountain fly,

Wash me Savior, or I die.

That's where humility begins – with the knowledge that I have nothing to commend me to God and everything to condemn me. I am saved by pure grace, through no merit of my own.

So I cannot live and act as if God is lucky to have me. At the cross I enter the incredible freedom of one who has received mercy he did not deserve, and grace he did not earn. I have become God's loved child by adoption, born again into his family.

Humility is anchored in that truth.

Humility is nurtured before God's throne. Even now, as a Christ-follower, when I stand before God, I am unmasked. I might be able to impress you with some great thing about me, but God looks for godly character and loving service, and God knows! The Bible tells us that everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

A teenager in my first church used to tell me: "Beauty is only skin deep, but ugly is clear to the bone." God sees me clear to the bone, to my very essence – and he still loves me. I am accepted because of what Jesus has done for me.

And, In spite of my bumbling inadequacies, God enlists me in a cause greater than myself as an ambassador of God's Kingdom, a witness to the reality of Jesus Christ in this world, and a necessary contributing member of his Body, the church. Everything that I need to be whole, to feel wanted and secure, valuable and appreciated, I receive from God's heart and God's hand.

To the extent that I enter into the experience of being both known and accepted in God's presence, I am freed from the internal demand that I get love and respect from other people. I am free to accept servant-form, even to the point of dying to the clamor of my own needy self.

Humility requires great confidence! It properly belongs only to those whose trust rests in God's unfailing love and faithfulness.

Humility is essential to inner rest and peace. The humble heart has quieted itself in God's presence. Pride and arrogance enslave us to the relentless necessity of making sure we are never diminished. It enlists all the forces of the soul to keeping up appearances. That's exhausting. Humility invites us to rest. The humble heart knows peace.

With our great Christmas traditions, it is surprising for us to discover that the Bible doesn't make much about the birth of Jesus. Only two Gospels mention his birth. Apostolic preaching focuses exclusively on his life, his sacrificial atonement, and his resurrection. This passage in Philippians is one of only two in which the writers of New Testament use the incarnation of Jesus – the Christmas story – to illustrate how Christ-followers should live.

Paul used it here to illustrate what he meant when he said a few verses earlier: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Phil 2:3).

Do it like Jesus did. Let go of those things you have clung to all your life in order to feel OK about yourself. Empty yourself in the welcoming and loving presence of your heavenly Father. Let him fill you with his Holy Spirit. Take the morphology of a servant. And accept the freedom of humility.

Arrogance and pride are loose threads that tug at the compacted fabric humility weaves in a Christlike spirit. Unravel this one grace, and all the others will come apart with it. *Agapē* – unprovoked love – will not spring from a proud heart. Without humility, we will resist the servant's role and demand to be served. Bring pride into a relationship, a marriage, a home, a church, an office, and we unleash a host of evils.

Keep a close watch for loose threads. Cut them off.

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ. Although he possessed God-form, he did not feel the demanding compulsion to cling to equality with God. He emptied himself, taking servant-form...he humbled himself."

Let me invite you to take a quiet moment here and expose your heart to God. Come out of hiding. God sees clear to the bone – what do you need to acknowledge to him so you can be honest with each other? Where is arrogance unraveling your character? What service are you resisting? What might *kenosis* – self-emptying – mean in your case as you stand before the Father?

May the Christmas manger become for you an icon of humility, a powerful reminder of that one great grace upon which so many others depend.