

## Training Session 28 - Becoming: Humble

### Objective

To grow in humility

### Key Scriptures

Philippians 2:3-11; John 3:22-30

### Introduction

“It’s hard to be humble,” Muhammad Ali is reported to have said, “when you’re as great as I am.”<sup>1</sup> But are humility and greatness really at odds with another? If anywhere, it seems like they might be at odds in corporate America, yet business management author Jim Collins deconstructed this false dichotomy put forth by Ali (and a host of others) in corporate America in his seminal book *Good to Great*. Collins, along with a team of researchers, studied 1,435 one-time Fortune 500 companies and highlighted 11 who were able to make the transition from good to great. To no one’s surprise, his research showed that great companies have great leaders. What was surprising, however, were his findings characterizing great leadership, what he called Level 5 leadership. “The good-to-great executives were all cut from the same cloth. Level 5 leaders embody a paradoxical mix of **personal humility** and professional will.”<sup>2</sup>

Collins convincingly shows us that even in corporate America, humility is a fresh wind and a powerful force for good. The results, however, extend far beyond corporate America. Think about how many great stories of literature showcase the winsome nature of humility over and against pride. Superman, in contrast to the arrogant Lex Luthor, is the humble, somewhat awkward Clark Kent. Harry Potter, in contrast to the brash and arrogant Malfoy, is a humble friend who loves Ron, Hermionie, and others even to the point of sacrificially giving his life, just as his mom humbly did for him at the beginning of his life. Aladdin, in contrast to the arrogant Jafar whose lust for power is his undoing, is a humble “street-rat,” who places the genie’s freedom above his own for his third and final wish. Jean ValJean, in contrast to the arrogant and judgmental inspector Javert in *Les Miserables*, is a humble businessman who redemptively employs those coming from humble circumstances like his own.

We could march through the works of literature, but the most important story to draw from for our purposes is the Biblical story. Think about the great leaders in the Bible God chose to use for mighty purposes. They were humble. Moses, who led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, was “a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). Humility isn’t the first thing we think of when Moses comes to mind. We think of a great leader with a hot temper, but God also said he was the most humble leader on the planet.

King David, whose leadership ushered in a Golden Age of unprecedented prosperity in Israel, began his kingship with the humble act of sparing Saul’s life on two occasions when he was seemingly delivered into David’s hands. We see David’s world class sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, but we also see his world class humility which created a model of repentance for a world full of sinners (see Psalm 51).

Then there is Mary, the one God chose to be the mother of His Son, because He was “mindful of the **humble** state of His servant” (Luke 1:48). God desires humility in His leaders and this is the type of person we want to become, so let’s dive into the deep and life-giving waters of humility and figure out how we can walk with a God-honoring humility that makes us and those around us better. Here is the first step we all must take to walk in a God-honoring humility:

## **1. Humility joyfully thanks God and others**

Ali called himself the greatest. What if Jesus called you the greatest? Jesus did just that with John the Baptist. He said, “among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). Why was he so great in God’s eyes? To understand the answer to the question you need to meet the man.

John was an up and coming star. He was a dynamic speaker with a charismatic personality and strong leadership skills. His future looked bright. Crowds were flocking to hear him speak, but there was a problem, according to John’s followers. His followers noticed the crowds were starting to dwindle a bit because of another leader emerging on the scene. This other leader was beginning to attract crowds and John’s disciples were lamenting that “everyone is going to him” (John 3:26).

John the Baptist didn’t see the situation quite like his disciples did. He said, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven” (John 3:27). Herein lies the first and critical step John took toward a life of humility. Every accomplishment, every success, every victory, every promotion, every relationship, every sale, “*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights*” (James 1:17). It’s all a gift. When we recognize this, we give thanks to God with great joy.

Our humility training session follows our gratitude training session for a reason because humility follows gratitude. John the Baptist told his disciples this as did another John—John Maxwell. Leadership consultant John Maxwell said he defines humility “as an *everyday choice* to credit God for our blessings and others for our successes.”<sup>3</sup> Maxwell takes us back to the everyday choices we each must learn to habitually make in the school of gratitude. Over and over we make everyday choices of gratitude to develop habits of gratitude. We’re grateful to God for His blessings and, according to Maxwell, to others for our successes.

When we’re constantly giving credit and thanks to God and others, humility waxes and pride wanes. We’ve all heard humble interviews of those who accomplished great things and we’ve heard prideful interviews. Humble interviews look like a quarterback thanking his line, his receivers, his coaches, and everyone else in the organization. Not to beat up on boxers, but prideful interviews sound like just about anything out of Floyd Money Mayweather’s mouth, such as, “I’ve accomplished everything. There’s nothing else to accomplish. I am the best... Ali was a great fighter, but I’m better. [Sugar Ray] Robinson was a great fighter, but I’m better.”<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Humility celebrates your place in God's story

Let's return to John the Baptist and learn from the second step he took towards the greatest humility the world has ever known from anyone other than Jesus. To begin with, John realized his sin made him so unworthy of Jesus that he shouldn't even be allowed to untie the straps of his sandals (John 1:27). Disciples never touched their master's feet in the first century. Such menial foot washing work was reserved for the lowest of the low (like servants and slaves), not for disciples. John is essentially saying, "I'm not even worthy to be a footwasher. I shouldn't be allowed to touch the strap of his sandal, much less his actual foot that the servants and slaves wash."

Balance this incredibly low view of himself (due to his sin), with the incredibly high view of himself gifted to him by God, "The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete" (John 3:29). Wonder of wonders, John knows what a lowly place he deserves because of his sin, but he also celebrates the exalted place he is given by the grace of God. "No longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends," (John 15:15). John is a friend of God, and not just any old friend at the margins. He's the best man in Jesus's wedding. He knows the groom so well that his friendship with him brings a soul-anchoring joy.

Think about your very best friend in the entire world. Someone who is in your corner to celebrate the good times and walk with you through the dark valleys. John has found that in Jesus. Position, title, influence, status, applause of men and women, condemnation from men and women—he is impervious to it all. He has the one thing he needs. He knows his place. He's the best man and he's at the wedding to celebrate his best friend in the whole world and his heart is soaring with joy.

In other words, John's humility enables him to know his place in God's story as a best man and celebrate it without having to make the whole story about himself. He knows it's not his wedding party. Author Paul Tripp illustrates the joyful humility of celebrating our place in God's story through the lens of a kindergarten party when he was a teacher. The party was for Suzie. Suzie's mom brought favors for the whole class, and all the kids brought presents for Suzie and stacked them in front of Suzie, who was perched in the seat of honor at the head of the table. "One of the boys in the class wasn't pleased. He began to harrumph. As Johnny looked at his bag of favors - two tootsie rolls, a lollipop, and a plastic whistle - and compared it to Suzie's big pile of gifts, he got angrier and angrier. His harrumphing grew louder and louder. Finally, one mom helping out had enough. She came to Johnny's seat at the table, knelt down to look him in the eye and said, "Johnny, it's not your party."<sup>5</sup>

Humility says, "It's not your party. This is a party for Jesus Christ. Amazingly enough, we're invited and placed in a position of incredible honor, but.....it's.....not.....our.....party!" It's His. We can harrumph like Johnny and live the rest of our lives bitter and envious over some worldly slight in status or we can celebrate the undeserved, exalted status we've been given as best friends of God. The choice is ours.

### 3. Humility considers the interests of others above your own

John the Baptist had a fundamental choice to make. Do I promote the career, fame, influence, and reputation of Jesus OR do I promote my own? In making his choice, he gives a pithy, concise handle to grasp for humility when he told his disciples, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). If we could just hold on to that sentence and make our lives about making Jesus greater we would have far greater lives than we could ask for or even imagine. He’s the hero of the story. He’s the hero of our lives. It’s His party, not ours.

But here’s the thing. Humility doesn’t simply call us to make *Jesus* greater; God-honoring humility calls us to make *people* around us greater. Every son of Adam and daughter of Eve struggles with this because we all suffer from what Augustine called *incurvatus in se*—we’re curved inward on ourselves. Martin Luther, drawing on this insight from Augustine, said, “Scripture describes man as so curved in upon himself that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself”.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as if he is taking a crowbar to straighten us out and point us toward others, Paul says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourself” (Philippians 2:3).

Oh my. Seems impossible, doesn’t it? Asking us to value others above ourselves is like asking us to grow wings and fly. In little and big ways, we’re asked to value others above ourselves. For example, humility means taking the shopping cart back at Trader Joes (because they never have places in the parking lot). It means not just dumping the shopping cart in some random spot in the Costco parking lot. Humility stops and picks up the trash when you miss the wastebasket on the way out of the bathroom at a restaurant. Either you pick it up or you make someone else do it.

How in the world can we pull this off? First, let’s consider what we shouldn’t do to value others above ourselves, then we’ll look at what we should do to value others above ourselves. Paul says the first thing we shouldn’t do is do anything with “selfish ambition” (Philippians 2:3). It isn’t that Paul has no ambition because he tells us it was his “ambition to preach the gospel” (Romans 15:20). Rather, it is that he has a Christ-centered ambition, meaning he has a drive to seek Christ and His kingdom (Matthew 6:33), not selfish ambition.

Here’s the difference, practically speaking. I have a friend who feels called by God to grow his company. Who doesn’t, you say? Every sales team, every company in America has growth goals. Yes, yes, but here is the difference. Most companies and most employees within companies are seeking growth for growth’s sake. Their goal, for example, is to be the largest provider of widgets in the country (or the like). On the other hand, my friend who feels called by God to grow his company is doing so because he wants more employees to experience the power of a Christ-centered company. Additionally, he wants more profit because that profit can be invested in Christ-centered development in underserved communities. One is growth for Christ’s sake and for others’ sake; the other is growth for your own sake. The same holds true at any level of employment in any company. Selfish ambition is a drive to promote yourself; Christ-centered ambition is a drive to promote Christ and others.

Christ-centered humility, then, maintains a Christ-centered ambition or drive towards Christ and His kingdom, but it also does “nothing out of vain conceit” (Philippians 2:3). The Greek word for vain conceit is *kenodoxia*, which is made up of two Greek words. *Kenosis* means to empty oneself and *Doxa* means glory, honor, and respect. Therefore, if we have the sickness of vain conceit, it means we literally feel as if we are continually being emptied of glory and respect, causing an insatiable craving for glory and respect, much like an addict craves a cigarette.

If we feel like we’re constantly being emptied of glory (*kenodoxia*), then when our feet hit the floor in the morning we’re incessantly driven by vain conceit to fill the ever-emptying hole of vanishing glory and respect. Rocky Balboa struggled with vain conceit in the very first movie. He wants to go the distance with the heavyweight champion of the world because then “I’m gonna know for the first time in my life, see, that I wasn’t just another bum from the neighborhood.” Thom Yorke, of the band Radiohead, who was asked why he continued to make music, even though he’d already achieved the success he hoped for, responded, “It’s filling the hole. That’s all anyone does.” Vain conceit feels the need to continually fill the hole. Vain conceit says these things (being somebody, having respect, approval, and success) are out there. I must go get them. Earn them. Today is the day. I’ve got this. No, actually, you don’t. Neither do I. What we have is a cruel taskmaster known as vain conceit and he won’t let us off the treadmill. Ever.

Paul blows the whistle on us and tells us to stop chasing the tail of vain conceit. Instead, “in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). Parents understand valuing the interest of others above your own better than most because for many of us the one relationship where we’ve experienced glimpses of valuing others above ourselves is with our children. We spend countless hours in the car taking our kids to soccer practice, piano lessons, tutors, and more because we value their interests above our own. The seemingly impossible challenge issued by Paul is to do this not just with your kids but with everyone around you.

#### **4. Humility happens when Jesus becomes greater in your life**

The reason valuing everyone’s interest above our own seems impossible is because it is impossible. It’s not a natural thing; it’s a supernatural thing. It should be noted that after Paul issues the humility challenge in Philippians 2:3-4 he points us to the only hope we have for a humble life in Philippians 2:5-11 (Jesus!) and calls us to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...who humbled himself.” Some translations (like the NKJV) say Jesus “made himself of no reputation.” That is humility. The one with the greatest reputation in the universe was willing to humble Himself and give up His reputation so we could possess a reputation unlike any other in the world.

Think on these marvelous things. Jesus, the one who possessed all the virtues under the sun, only commended one virtue in Himself when He said, “I am humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). Then He said, “Take my yoke (of humility) upon you and learn from me...and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). When we take His yoke of humility, it brings rest. The ever-vanishing hole is filled. We can stop running and rest and receive.

Humility must be received as a gift from Jesus. It isn't natural. Pride is natural; humility is supernatural and it must be received by faith. It only comes as we put on Christ (daily) and take on His yoke of humility. In Him, we find the way (to humility), the truth (of humility), and the life (with humility). There is no other way.

### Discussion Questions

1. John 3:22-30. The first principle of humility is that humility joyfully thanks God and others. John Maxwell defines humility "as an *everyday choice* to credit God for our blessings and others for our successes. How can you grow in this practice?
2. The second humility principle is that it celebrates your place in the story. How did John the Baptist do this? How are you seeking to do this?
3. "It's not your party." How can this phrase help you celebrate your place in God's story?
4. Read John 3:30 and Philippians 2:3-4. The third principle of humility is that it considers others' interests above your own. How did John the Baptist do this and how are you seeking to do this? Discuss strengths and weaknesses in your life in this area.
5. Describe what vain conceit is. What is selfish ambition and how does it differ from Christ-centered ambition?
6. Read Philippians 2:5-11. The fourth humility principle is that humility happens when Jesus becomes greater in your life. Discuss how Jesus is the way (to humility), the truth (of humility), and the life (with humility).

### Endnotes

1. <https://www.fastcompany.com/3018516/benjamin-franklin-george-washington-and-the-power-of-humility-in-leadership>
2. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 22.
3. <https://www.johnmaxwell.com/blog/a-leaders-need-for-humility/>
4. [https://www.espn.com/boxing/story/\\_/id/18755368/floyd-mayweather-40-greatest-quotes-celebrate-40th-birthday](https://www.espn.com/boxing/story/_/id/18755368/floyd-mayweather-40-greatest-quotes-celebrate-40th-birthday)
5. <https://www.paultripp.com/wednesdays-word/posts/its-not-your-party>
6. Tappert, et al. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 25, p. 345, see also pp. 291-92