

Humility

This is our second week of our Focus Season called The Unshakable Life. If you're unfamiliar with our focus seasons, they're basically a time when we come together as a church and everyone focuses on the same thing. We preach a 5-week series. We create these focus guides with daily devotions, family devotions, small group questions, places for sermon notes, and what we call soul training exercises. The key to a Focus Season is that you don't just come and listen to the message, but you do the exercises and devotions, be a part of a small group and use it as an opportunity to focus on growth.

The best exercise of the whole series, is the one we did on Monday (p. 13). It's not too late to do it. Since we're talking about building character, we have you evaluate your character. Three strengths and three weaknesses. But not only that, the exercise also requires you to ask someone else, who knows you well about your character.

Monday, I had a friend ask *me* by text to share my thoughts about their character. I came up with three strong ones pretty quickly—it's always more fun to tell a friend about their strengths than their weaknesses. But I had to think a while about his weak character traits, I came up with one. Then I texted, "I can't think of any others."

Almost immediately, I got a text back that said, "That's unacceptable! You've known me a long time." Part of me chuckled, but part of me said, "Wow! This is a

courageous dude!” I love it. It’s kind of a funny story, but there’s a hard truth in it and it would be good for you if you don’t listen to anything else I say, to listen closely right now.

Last week I asked the question, “Do you really want to grow godly character?” This is not a big-picture question. You have ask yourself daily—in the moment of decision or temptation. If you don’t get around to doing exercises like that or you’re not willing to hear the truth, then stop wondering why you’re not growing. If you’re not interested or are too afraid to hear the truth and make changes, these sermons won’t help you much.

Ask yourself, “*Who do I want to be?*” If you want a nice sentimental faith that makes you feel good, then you can continue to coast. But if you do that, when the trials of life come around like they always do, don’t be surprised if your faith is shaken or you respond in a way that seems out of character. ///

Last week we saw that God has given you everything you need for a good life and godly character. What you have to do is make every effort to create the environment that will activate the work of God in your life. I hope I wasn’t too hard on you.

Well, today we’re talking about virtue that’s the foundation of all the other character traits. With it, you can change and grow. Without it, you’ll be relegated to a life of pretending. Just like pride is the foundation of sins, its opposite is the foundation of the virtues. I’m talking about *humility*.

Humility is infused into every breath of the teachings of Jesus. For many, it's the virtue that epitomizes Christianity. Most people assume humility has always been a virtue, but in the Roman world of Jesus' day, humility was a character flaw. If you've got it and you don't flaunt it, you're weak. Women, slaves should be humble, but not men, especially powerful men.

Now, this attitude isn't all that different than the world today that encourages us to take pride in our accomplishments and be proud of who we are—to make sure everyone around us acknowledges our value and worth. “Don't let anyone look down on you.” “Fight for what you want. Demand it!” “You deserve this!”

The roots of this comes from a 1969 book called “The Psychology of Self-Esteem” by Nathaniel Branden. As he looked at people who commit domestic abuse or other violent crimes—he came to the conclusion that low self-esteem was to blame. If they knew their value, they would be good, decent people.

This sparked a self-esteem revolution, where we constantly told our kids how great they are and everyone got a trophy because, of course, if they don't, when they get older they're more likely to knock off a liquor store. In fact, from 1970 through the year 2000, there were 15,000 scholarly articles written on self-esteem. Well, the message stuck, and our society has done a great job building people's self-esteem.

In the early 50's psychologists asked 10,000 adolescents if they considered themselves to be a "very important person." 12 percent said yes. They asked the same question to adolescents in 1989, but this time 80 percent of boys and 77 percent of girls said "yes." In America, narcissistic personality traits have risen as fast as obesity, with the scores increasing faster and faster each decade.

We are a society built on pride. But the problem with pride is that it doesn't deliver what it promises. In 2003 Roy Baumeister, one of the pioneers of the self-esteem movement, changed his mind, saying that his recent work showed "*no evidence that high self-esteem made people better students, more successful at work, or healthier.*" He said, "*Forget about self-esteem and concentrate more on self-control and self-discipline.*"

There are many problems with pride. *Pride turns people into competition.* It's not just that we want to be smart or athletic or wealthy, we want to be smarter, more athletic or wealthier than the other guy.

Seeing people as our competition makes it *impossible for us to love them.* Pride and love are in conflict because pride says "do what's best for *you*," but love says "*do what's best for others.*" If others are our competition, we'll either *use* them or *put them down.*

Pride blinds us to reality. A recent study asked students around the world if they're good at math. American students ranked number one in the world at thinking we're good at math—we're 36th. South Koreans think they're the worst, but they're the best.

Pride, is self-focus—an unhealthy self-consciousness like you’re on a stage at every moment performing for the world, constantly curating our image—either you’re trying to *impress* people with how smart or witty or woke you are or *hide* from them so they don’t see your flaws. Social media has only accelerated the problem.

Proverbs 16:18 tells us, **“Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”** This is because pride leads to complacency. If you’re thinking, “this would be really great for someone else, but I don’t need it” watch out—you might be dealing with pride.

So, if artificially boosted self-esteem is bad for individuals and societies, is the answer low self-esteem? Maybe if we make people feel bad about themselves so they’ll work harder to improve. But we know this doesn’t work either. It only leads to despair and discouragement. So, what’s the solution? It’s practicing the Biblical virtue of *humility*.

Now, many people misunderstand humility. Not only that, but humility doesn’t come naturally to any of us. But if humility is foundational to our character, we probably better figure that out. So, turn with me to Romans 12:1-8. We’re going to look at three keys to developing humility. [Rom 12:1-8] (p 776) So, what are the three keys?

So, let’s start here—the first key to humility is a deep sense of gratitude. Take a look at verse 1, **“Therefore...because of God’s mercy...”** Did any of you grow up with a rich kid who thought he was better than everyone because he wore nice clothes and had all the latest gadgets? If not, maybe it *was* you. In any case, he wasn’t self-aware enough to

see how ridiculous it is for a little kid to think he's something because his family has money. The kid didn't understand that *pride* is not the appropriate response to a *gift*.

This is what Paul is getting at. In the book of Romans, Paul is dealing with an animosity between Jews and Gentiles. Jewish Christians wanted the place of honor because they had the Old Testament Law and that they were God's original chosen people—a kind of “we were here first” attitude.

But when Gentiles started to believe, they liked to point out that they weren't the ones who broke the covenant and rejected and crucified their Messiah. Both groups believed they were the ideal Christians.

So, Paul wrote this letter to bring them together. He tells them they need to drop their pride and come together, and the reason is...they don't have anything to be proud of. For instance, that's the point he's making in Romans 3:23, **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”** The key the word EVERYONE. Even though *everyone* is a masterpiece created in God's image, *every one* of us is also stained because of our sin. But God's mercy has been made available to *anyone* who puts their faith in Jesus—regardless of what they've done, their talent, ethnicity, social status or pedigree. It's only because of God's great mercy. We're all the same so it's silly to think any of us is better or more deserving than anyone else.

But understand that God’s mercy goes further than forgiveness. EVERYTHING you have was given to you by God. Sure, you work hard with what you have and that’s a good thing, but...It’s God who gave you life. It’s God who gave you your mind, your gifts, your family and the opportunity to get the job you have. The list goes on and on. Life is a gift, so the appropriate response is not pride, it’s gratitude.

This is counter to the messages we receive from our world. “You deserve it!” “You’re worth it!” “Don’t settle for less than what you deserve!” These messages encourage us to demanding and entitled—like we’re the center of the universe. That’s why Paul writes in verse 2, **“Don’t conform to the pattern of this world, but let your mind be transformed!”** **“When you do, you’ll be able to see God’s will clearly.”**

You would think getting what we deserve would make us happy, but it doesn’t. It makes us miserable. But recognizing that the only reason we’re alive—the only reason we have *anything* is because God is merciful, changes everything.

When you feel entitled, you never have enough; but when live with gratitude, you appreciate even the small things. Entitlement skews our perspective on life.

Have you ever heard the term “First World Problems?” The other day I was looking at some social media posts you could consider first-world problems. Such as, *“Dear Carnival Cruise lines: seriously, no WiFi? We are not on speaking terms.”* Or this one, *“I just got back from the boring trip my dad made me take for spring break. I was like Dad,*

I've been the Bahamas a bajillion times! Can't I go to Mexico this year? And he just said no and made me go on a cruise. Totally rude!" or this one "Just had my praline spread confiscated by TSA at Dulles. As far as I'm concerned the terrorists have now won."

I know you're appalled, but the truth is we're all prone to this mindset, so to remind yourself of this, start every day with gratitude. Get an index card and at night write down five things you're thankful for. Put it beside your bed and read it first thing in the morning. And if you do many of the problems you thought you had will start to seem a little less significant and you'll realize that the world doesn't revolve around you. ///

Now let's jump to verse 3 where we see not only a great definition of humility, but our second key to develop it—*self-awareness*. Verse 3, **"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has given you."**

Now, he doesn't say this explicitly, but Paul is defining humility.

He says first, "Don't think too highly of yourself." OK, we got that. We might expect him to say, you should think little of yourself—that you're no good. This is how most people view humility. But that's not what he says. He says—and this is the second key—to view yourself *soberly*. That Greek word carries the idea of being balanced, being sound with all your faculties working. You're not impaired by faulty thinking or

propaganda. It's sometimes translates as *self-controlled* or clear-headed. It's to hold an *accurate* view of yourself and your place in the world.

Think of humility as muscle balance. Almost every muscle in your body has another muscle to oppose it. Biceps and triceps; quads and hamstrings; abdominals and back. When one of the muscles gets significantly stronger than the other, you run into problems. Those opposing muscles are there to keep everything in balance.

Rather than thinking of humility as a low opinion of yourself, think of it the healthy balance between the high and low opinion of yourself. Yes, I'm made in the image of God, but I also have mud that I need God to clean up. Yes, I have some great gifts, but other people have gifts, too. Humility keeps your ego in the proper place.

That means that if God has given you a talent, then acknowledge and use that talent. If he's given you a good personality or you're great at math. When somebody says, "You're so good at math." Don't say, "Oh, I'm not really that good." Do you know what you should say? You should say, "Thanks. That means a lot to me." Or "I'm thankful God gave that to me."

But here's the other side of it. You have to be willing to admit your flaws and shortcomings, too. When my friend asked me about his weaker character traits, I mentioned one and he was surprised about it because he had actually listed that one as

one of his strengths. He said he asked his wife and she agreed with me! Now, as hard as that was for him to hear, it was good for him because our perspective can get skewed.

I'm not going to lie, it's hard to hear that someone else notices you're less than perfect. But it's only when we know it, that we can grow. My friend, now has the opportunity to dig in and grow in that area of his character. This is why humility is the foundation of the other virtues—it makes us willing to look at ourselves honestly.

But as painful as it can be to hear, it also relieves so much pressure. When you value humility, you don't have to perform. You're less easily offended because your value isn't based on your flawless performance. And that can be quite a relief.

John Ortberg writes, *"Humility is the freedom to stop trying to be what we're not, or pretending to be what we're not, and accepting our 'appropriate smallness.' In Luther's words, humility is the decision to "let God be God."*

The third key to humility is to *take on the identity of a servant*. In Matthew 20, when Jesus heard his disciples arguing about who was the greatest, he said to them, **"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be your slave."** (vs 25-27)

Here's how Paul works this out in Romans 12. After Paul talks about thinking of ourselves with sober judgment, he talks about gifts. Like we mentioned before, we all

have gifts that God has given us. We can be self-serving—using those gifts to serve ourselves—or we can use them to serve others. This is why God gave them to begin with.

We are all part of the body—not the most important part. Just a part called to do the work of Christ and bring glory to God. And each of us play a role according to the gifts God has given us. He mentions prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, and leadership, but there are countless gifts that can serve the church.

But this service has to be done with the right attitude. Sometimes, pastors will encourage people to use their gifts in the church so they'll be fulfilled. "You'll feel so good when you use your gifts." But do you see how even this plays into the self-focus of our world? You're serving the church, but the real reason is still YOU!

I'm not saying you should be miserable when you're serving. But your gauge of service cannot be whether you feel fulfilled when you do it. The consideration has to be, "Did the person (or the church) need it?" and "was God glorified through it?" When you can honestly say that the only thing that matter is that God is glorified—that's humility!

But I want to leave you with this today. Last week, I said that when we develop godly character, we become what we were created to be. Our model for that is Jesus. Jesus came as the real-life picture of a person made in the image of God.

And here's the amazing thing about Jesus. If there was ever anyone who deserved to be served; if there was ever anyone who deserved praise and acclaim because he was

all that, it was Jesus. And yet he made himself the ultimate servant. Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul from Philippians, chapter 2.

“³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature, God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”