

Jesus' Definition of Humility

What do you think about yourself? Do you like yourself? Do you consider yourself to be a humble person? Whatever opinion you have of yourself, if you keep reading, you will discover how Jesus defines humility. In Matthew 11:29, we are told that Jesus is gentle and humble in heart. These two verses help us understand that Jesus is the ultimate example of humility, and Philippians 2:8 tells us that Jesus humbled Himself when He died on the cross. Since Jesus is our example of and our authority on humility, we will have a better idea of how humble we are. Consequently, our study is an important one for the serious Christian. This passage teaches us that one of the characteristics of a true Christian is humility. Humility does not mean that a person is passive or emotionally weak. A humble person does not yield to everyone. Jesus was not a weak man. The English idiom “wimp” does not apply to the man or woman who is humble. Therefore, let us discover if we are characterized by a spirit of humility. Our study is Luke 17:7-10.

JESUS' FOUR EXAMPLES OF HUMILITY. Our study is a continuation of a discussion between Jesus and the disciples that started in Luke 17:1.

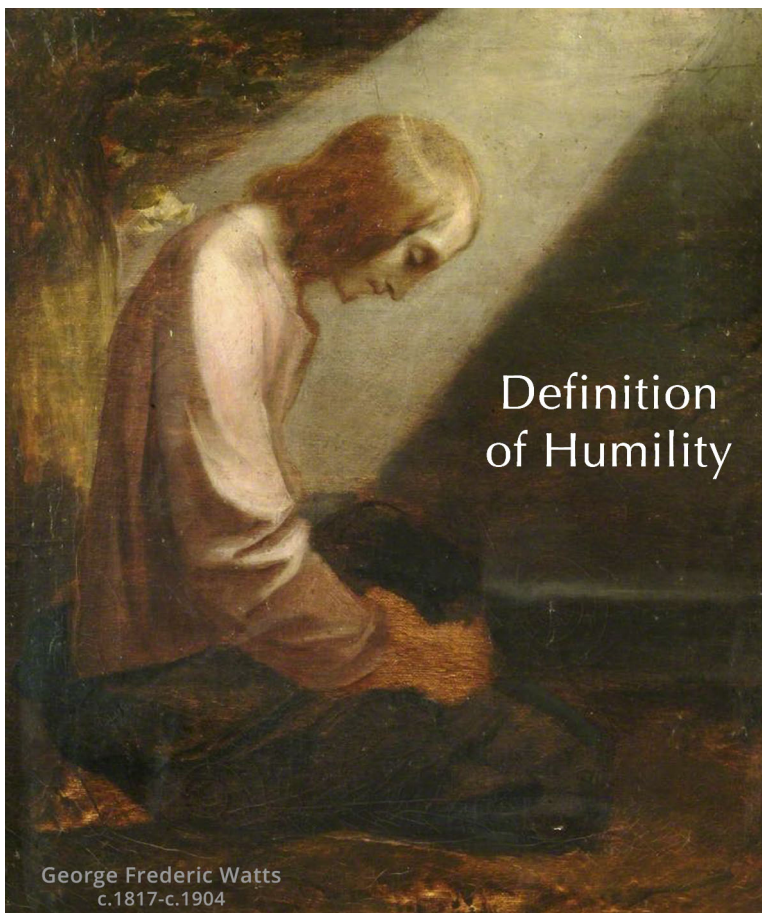
When we arrive at verses seven through ten, we discover that this entire section is about humility. Then when we reflect on verses 1-6 of Luke 17, we find that Jesus has been talking about humility throughout this entire section by using different illustrations. All of the principles that Jesus has been teaching us will never become evident in our lives if we are proud people.

For example, in verses 1-3 Jesus warned us to not be a stumbling block to others. Those who are proud will not care and will continue to be stumbling blocks to many people. Since God says that He is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5), the proud will suffer the consequences of their actions.

The Holy Spirit has warned us that “what we sow, we will reap” (Galatians 6:7). Proud people usually are not concerned about

others. The proud person is stuck on him or her self,

The humble person is truly concerned about others. In Philippians 2:3-4 God has revealed one characteristic of humble people. They care more about others than about themselves.



Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Philippians 2:3-4 (NASB)

Then in verses 5-8 we are told Christ was an example of humility when He died on the cross for our sins. He cared more about

us than Himself. He is the ultimate example of humility. Jesus was and is concerned about us! A humble person strives to not be a stumbling block.

Jesus' second point about humility occurs in Luke 17:3 when He tells us to be concerned about others who are caught in a sin. We discovered that Jesus most likely was referring to a habitual pattern of sin or a single major sin. It takes humility to gently and kindly help someone stop sinning (Galatians 6:1). Humility is required to approach someone in a loving manner knowing that they may verbally or physically attack you in response. Only a humble person will seek to help someone and be willing to graciously endure the backlash that may occur. The humble person helps others break free from habits of sin.

In verse 4, Jesus' third example of humility is that we must be willing to repeatedly forgive others who offend us. This example concerns sins that do not necessarily call for church discipline. Jesus said we must be willing to forgive seven times. The Pharisees taught that a person did not have to repeatedly forgive. Earlier, Jesus had told Peter that he had to willingly forgive seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-35). Forgiving and forgiving is an act of humility. Sadly, some Christians will not forgive unless the individual confesses the exact sin, apologizes and begs to be forgiven. The proud person withholds forgiveness. It is as if the offended individual withholds forgiveness as an act of revenge. They insist the offending individual must beg to be forgiven, and only then will the proud person offer forgiveness. Often the forgiveness is accompanied by a lecture about what the offending person did that was wrong. The humble person will unilaterally forgive before an apology is given or if it is never given. The humble person does not hold a grudge and forgives others because God wants us to forgive. In Ephesians 4:32 God urges every believer to forgive others, because Christ has forgiven you!

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32 (NASB)

That is the reason to forgive. You have been forgiven; therefore, you should forgive unilaterally and without any conditions. Humble people forgive and forgive.

The fourth example of humility occurs in verses 5-6 when Jesus rebuked the disciples for their little faith. Little faith is like the three smaller fingers pointing back at you when you point at someone else. The three smaller fingers on your hand reveal who you truly trust when the index finger is pointing at someone you claim to actually trust. That is, little faith means you are trusting yourself and not Christ. Little faith reveals your trust is in the wrong person. Proverbs 3:5-6 reminds believers they are to trust in the Lord with *all their heart*.

**Trust in the LORD with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.
Proverbs 3:5-6 (NASB)**

Proverbs 3:5-6 is a convicting passage because none of us perfectly trust God. The greater our humility, the greater is our faith in God. That is, the more we trust God, the less we trust in ourselves.

The starting point to having more faith in God is to realize how little your faith is in God. True humility trusts God and not self.

JESUS' NEXT ILLUSTRATION OF HUMILITY. The fifth and final example of humility in Jesus' series of teachings will be difficult for some to accept. He will teach us that a Christian is a humble person who will serve Christ as a slave and not expect any "Thank you" or praises for one's service. Our service to Christ is expected. We should not expect rewards. Here is Christ's fifth example of humility.

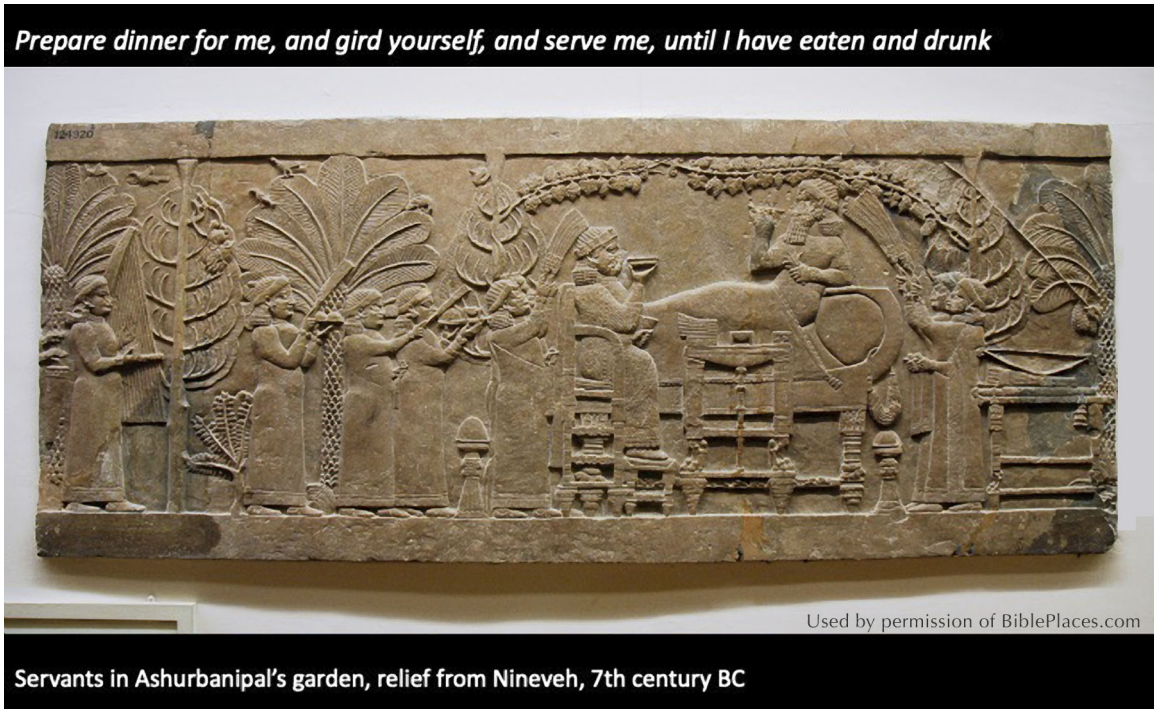
"Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?" Luke 17:7-9 (NASB)

The illustration is simple. The "slave" in this verse is not a servant or an employee (*pais, diakonos* or *oiketes*). The Greek

word for “slave” in this verse is *doulos*. *Doulos* refers to a man or woman who is a slave owned by a master. As a result, he or she is not paid a salary for their work. They are obligated to obey their master. Now it would be polite and kind to express praise and thanks to the individual for their work; but if the master failed to do that, the slave is still obligated to perform the work since he or she is owned by the master. Some punishment could follow if the slave refused to perform the required task.

The slave in this illustration was performing the tasks of plowing and caring for sheep. After he finished his tasks, he came in from the field. Jesus’ rhetorical question prepares us

JESUS’ DEFINITION OF HUMILITY. Then Jesus arrived at the point He wanted to teach the disciples. The reason the master did not thank the slave was that the slave was obligated to obey his master. The master did not owe him anything. The same is true for employees in a business. A business manager pays employees and then does not have to ask the employees what tasks they would like to perform. The manager identifies the tasks the employee needs to perform, assigns the task to the employee and then orders them to perform the tasks. Failure to obey results in being fired or being demoted. Because one is paid does not mean the manager technically owes him or her anything additional besides their wages.



for His conclusion. The question is “Will you say to the slave after he comes in from his work, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat?’” Some of us might do that. But Jesus’ point is that is not normal. Usually, the master gives the slave another order. In this illustration the master commands the slave to “Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink.” The master does not thank the slave! The master does not ask if the slave is tired and needs time to rest. The master simply gives more orders, and the slave is the last one to eat.

In Christ’s day however, slaves were owned and cared for, given a place to sleep and food to eat. However, a slave could be punished and even put to death for failure to obey the master. A slave was obligated to perform duties for his master. That is why Jesus concluded His illustration with these words,

“So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’” Luke 17:10 (NASB)

Jesus’ illustration is powerful. He told the disciples that they

should have the attitude that they are “unworthy slaves,” who should be thankful for anything that they receive. They were not owed anything. There is an old saying that states they were “good for nothing.” Then Jesus heightens the point by saying that which we “ought to have done.” The Greek word for “ought” is *opheilo*. The word means “to be under obligation to make a payment as the result of having previously received something of value.”¹

Jesus was describing humility. He was teaching the disciples a spiritual principle that believers are slaves of Christ. Christ died on the cross so that their sins could be forgiven, a blessing that they could never pay back. Even if we were to die in an attempt to erase our own sins, we would utterly fail. We would only go to hell. Only in Jesus Christ is there forgiveness of sins, and in none other. Proud people never submit and always feel entitled to special treatment.

What was Jesus’ real point? The character of a true disciple of Christ is humility. True disciples will choose to submit to Christ and expect nothing in return. True disciples of Christ realize because of all that God has done for them, they deserve nothing in return for faithful service to Him.

In summary, Christ’ definition of humility is that humble people submit to Him and expect nothing in return. This is Jesus’ fifth characteristic of humility. Humble people submit to others and expect nothing in return. Therefore, the ultimate proof of a humble believer is that he or she submits to Christ without expecting rewards and demands nothing in return.

Sadly, some Christians struggle with submission to Christ. They believe that if they serve Christ, He should reward them. They are proud individuals. The idea of slavery is offensive to them. They do not want to be obedient. They would rather party and enjoy the pleasures of the world and their bodies, while clinging to the promise of going to heaven. They want the guarantee of heaven while being rebellious. If they serve Christ, they believe God should see their good works and give them some special blessing. They serve Christ as if Christ is the employer and they are the hired employees who deserve payment.

Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. 30-107) made this comment

1. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 581.

about a believer’s relationship with God,

The Christian has not power over himself, but is [ever] ready to be subject to God.²

That is, believers should respond as a slave to God. Slaves should be like the EverReady Bunny—always ready to obey. Slaves are always subject to God. Are you a slave of God, or are you your own independent person? The mark of a true Christian is that they want to be a slave for the Father and for Jesus Christ.

HUMILITY IN THE APOSTLES. Let’s take a few minutes and learn about humility from the lives of the apostles. It is important to know that the apostles called themselves the *doulos* of Christ: Paul (Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1), Peter (2 Peter 1:1), James (James 1:1) and Jude (Jude 1:1). In Revelation 1:1 the apostle John said that he was a *doulos* of Christ and so is every Christian. In your Bible these verses may not say “slave” but “bond-servant” or “bond-servants.”

The translators of our English Bibles have refused to accurately translate the Greek word *doulos* because they believe some Christians would be offended if they read that they were the slaves of Christ. But the apostles were *not* offended when they wrote that they were *doulos*. They were humble men who were willing to be slaves for Christ. How humble are you? The apostles wanted to be a *doulos*, to be obedient in everything that Christ asked.

Humility is a heart-attitude and the work of the Holy Spirit. Let us stop for a minute and examine 1 Corinthians 12:3. It also reveals the character of a true Christian. The apostle is a great example.

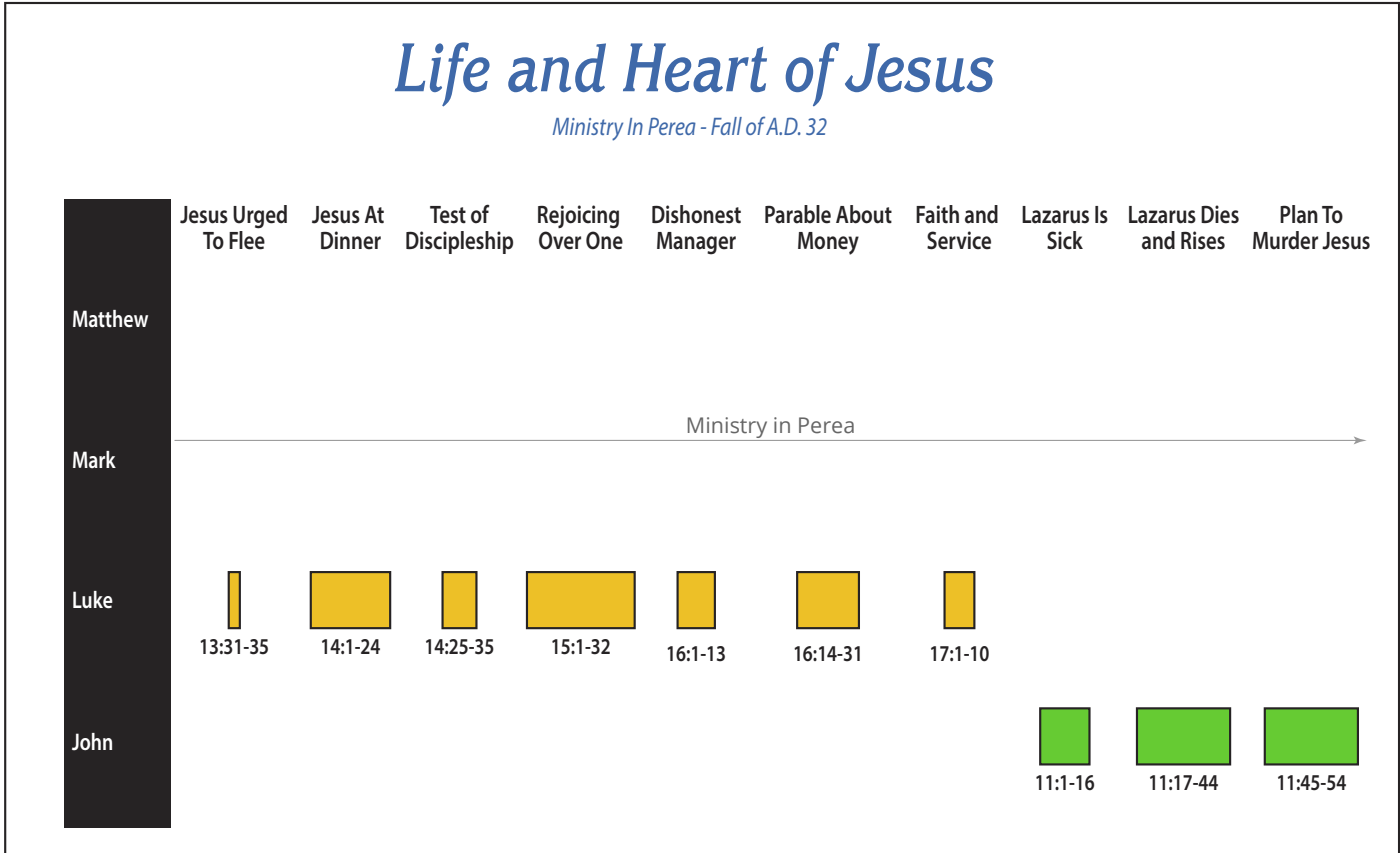
HEART ATTITUDE OF HUMILITY. The humility of the apostles should cause us to respond in shame. They put us to shame. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:16-17 the apostle Paul expresses his sincere heart attitude with these words.

For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. 1 Corinthians 9:16-17

2. Ignatius of Antioch. The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp. IV.

Life and Heart of Jesus

Ministry In Perea - Fall of A.D. 32



(NASB)

Paul’s message is clear. He said I have no good reason to boast. Why? Because he was under compulsion. The Greek word for compulsion is *ananke*. The word can mean distress, trouble, a complete obligation or a necessary thing. Therefore, Paul is saying that he is completely obligated to preach the gospel. He implies that it is a hardship for him, and then he says, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.”

At this point some believers and pastors would quit the ministry. Some believe the ministry should be easy and a thrilling experience. But that is not true. Jesus warned us that a disciple is not above his master (Matthew 10:24). In John 15:20, Jesus said,

Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. John 15:20 (NASB)

Sadly, this is also true inside the church. Some of the worst enemies of the cross are the critics in the church. Paul suf-

fered from people outside the church and conflicts within the church (Acts 15:1-2; 15:39; 2 Timothy 4:10).

Paul said, “I am under compulsion!” Then Paul added that he would not receive a reward if he preached the gospel out of obligation. He would only receive a reward if he preached the gospel voluntarily—because he wanted to do so. That is the heart attitude of one who wants to be a slave for Christ. But if you are a slave for Christ out of necessity, then you do not have a reward.

CONCLUSION. If we are honest, we are not completely humble. We have not arrived. Humble people are not those who practice self-deprecating humor. They do not brag or interrupt others, but are willing to give credit to and help others. The truth is we can only identify the characteristics of humility as we can identify the symptoms of a disease. We cannot see the bacteria or viruses that cause illnesses, but we can identify the symptoms.

We have discovered the symptoms of humility are five-fold:

- 1) Humble people strive to not be a stumbling block.

- 2) The humble person helps others break free from habits of sin.
- 3) Humble people forgive and are forgiven.
- 4) Humble people trust God and not themselves.
- 5) A truly humble person eagerly and joyfully submits to God and others.

These five symptoms help us identify humility in our own lives. How humble are you? Christ's teachings and the exam-

ple of the apostles should be convicting. The ultimate example of humility is eager willingness to submit to God. How submissive are you? How self-sacrificing are you? Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21,

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain! Philippians 1:23 (NASB)

Anything less is failure! Humble sacrificial service for Christ is the ultimate symptom and definition of humility!