

The
Way
Up Is
Down



LARRY DEASON

One Step Closer to Jesus Series

About the Author

Larry Deason has been proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ for 40 years. He has served the Body of Christ as deacon, elder, preacher, missionary, counselor, teacher and writer.

Larry's seminars have been presented throughout the Northeastern United States, Texas, California and Florida. He has also presented seminars in Australia, New Zealand, Tonga and the Fiji Islands.

While doing mission work in New Zealand Larry co-founded and taught for four years at the *Tauranga Two-Year Bible School*. He also co-founded and directed the *Northeast School of Biblical Studies* where he taught for 12 years. He also consulted in the establishing of the *South Pacific Bible College* in New Zealand. Larry has been a guest lecturer each year for the past 23 years at the South Pacific Bible College.

Larry Deason has written more than 20 booklets, books and in-depth study guides. The books have been distributed in all the states in the USA and in more than 70 nations worldwide including China, Eastern Europe, and Russia.

Larry and his wife Helen have been married for 50 years. They have two daughters, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Larry Deason continues to do mission work, present his seminars and distribute his books worldwide.

To
Jesus Christ
My Personal
Lord and Savior,
Who is the
Focus of my life.

My orientation in His Amazing Grace and
His Love my motivation in loving all others.

Other Books

by

Larry Deason

The Eternal Purpose and Plan of God:

The Meaning and Purpose of Life

The Love of Christ in the Local Congregation:

Sharing Together in the Life and Labor of Christ

That You May Have Life:

Gospel of John

The Righteousness of God:

Romans

Set Free? Stay Free!

(The Fallacy and Failure of Legalism)

**The Way Up
is Down**

*“For everyone who exalts himself
will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself
will be exalted.”*

Luke 14:11

*Who is wise and understanding among you?
Let him show it by his good life,
by deeds done in the humility
that comes from wisdom.*

James 3:13

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that though he was rich,
yet for your sakes he became poor...*

2 Corinthians 8:9

*“...a dispute arose among them
as to which of them
was considered
to be greatest.”*

The Call to Humility

The wise man said, “A man’s pride bring shim low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.”¹ Pride is a terrible thing, a ruining thing, a blinding thing. It is the very opposite of that attitude and way of life which Jesus of Nazareth embodied, and to which He calls us: humility. In calling us to humility (even as He has called us to love), Jesus calls us to Himself. He calls us to become as He is.

THE GREAT PARADOXICAL TRUTH REVEALED IN GOD’S WORD

The Paradox Implies a Change of Perception

If we are ever to enjoy “life that is life indeed,” we must come to understand the “God-Life” as it is revealed in God’s written Word (the Bible), and as it has been embodied in God’s incarnate Word (Jesus of Nazareth). We need a radical change in our way of thinking about life. As the prophet said, God’s thoughts are not man’s thoughts, and neither are His ways our ways.²

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this

*world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are...*³

Nowhere in all of Scripture or in all of history is this truth shown more powerfully than in the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Christ. The perspective of the sinful human creature is set against that of his Creator. That is why Jesus calls us to make a drastic adjustment.

The Paradox Must Penetrate Our Hearts

The more I study and reflect upon this wondrous gospel of Jesus Christ—God revealing Himself and his infinite love by putting on human nature and coming to this low ground to be rejected, die, and rise again for the sake of His selfish, arrogant human creatures—the more I contemplate this Good News, the more awesome it becomes to me. It is a gloriously humbling gospel. I pray that the full impact of the gospel of God will penetrate more and more deeply into our hearts, so that all of us may know the incomprehensible peace, joy, satisfaction, and contentment that come only to the humble of heart.

Self-centered pride is a millstone which Jesus would remove from around our necks. In several paradoxical sayings,⁴ Jesus has warned us of the eternal consequences of spending life in self-centered pride.

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”⁵

“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”⁶

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”⁷

“For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.”⁸

Here is an enigma that only the humility of a child-like heart will receive. Yet, it is a constant theme, woven into the entire fabric of Christ’s teaching. To the worldly mentality, to the unspiritual mind, it is a concept as inscrutable as the life of the One who uttered it. Even so, it is Jesus’ embodiment of this principle of exaltation through humility that eventually transformed the disciples.

The example of Christ, together with the enlightenment and empowering of the Holy Spirit who came on Pentecost to represent the glorified Jesus, eventually turned the Roman world upside down—really, rightside up! But neither the pride of Rome nor the pride of the disciples would be broken in a day. It was a most difficult lesson to learn, even

for those who had walked with the lowly Galilean. They had not yet learned it by the night of His betrayal. Their egos clashed together that night for the prize of greatness in the Kingdom, despite the fact that the King Himself was among them as One who served.⁹

In the night of the mockery of His trial, they had still not learned; nor was the dawning of the day of the cross itself sufficient to light up their darkened understanding. Christ would go lower still, buried in the heart of the earth, and yet they would not understand. They would indeed come to know the truth, but not by a process of abstract reasoning. God would have to shake and shatter their self-centered viewpoint by confronting them with an empty tomb, a risen Lord, and the sending of the Spirit to guide them into all truth. The Holy Spirit would illuminate their memories of the past three years with Jesus. Only then would they grasp the meaning of Christ's words and deeds:

“I will tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”¹⁰

The Paradox is Personified by Jesus Christ

Apart from Christ, we would rather be self-exalted than God-exalted. We would prefer to lift ourselves up to greatness by our own bootstraps. But the joy that comes through exaltation can never come through *self-exaltation*; it comes only from *God-exaltation*. The gospel of Christ clearly teaches us that the only way to be lifted up by God is through humility:

“I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts...How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”¹¹

...And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.¹²

...you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.¹³

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place...¹⁴

Jesus is the way to God-exaltation, because His way is the way of humility. He is the “Kingdom

paradox personified.” Why was the Father “well-pleased” with Jesus? It was because He approached the crown of glory *through* the cross of humility; He didn’t try to go *around* it.

The Paradox and The Principle of Humility

Humility can come to us by means of humiliation, forced upon us by circumstances that are beyond our control. Humility can also come to us by our own choice to humble ourselves under the hand of God, who is King over all circumstance.¹⁵ Jesus was not humiliated by circumstance; rather, “He humbled Himself.” He freely chose to submit to death on a cross, even as He had volunteered to be born of a woman.

Humiliating circumstances may teach us nothing, except to loathe ourselves. However, God may use these same circumstances to persuade us to choose the way of Christ; that is, the way of humility. Humility teaches us to view life realistically, and to love ourselves with the love of Christ.

Humility rejoices in the glorious truth that the way up is down. In God’s order, the Kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit; the meek inherit the earth. The guarantee is in the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is alive and reigning in the highest position of authority in the universe. God knows how to exalt the

humble, and He knows how to abase and humble the proud. The mind of God is clearly revealed in the written testimony of Scripture; but God's will that we humble ourselves before Him is also written in the language of our everyday life experiences. Ironically, it takes a certain degree of humility to *learn* humility, whether from Scripture or from life's experiences. Pride blinds us to the truth about ourselves. "To him who has, more will be given; he who has not will lose even the little he has." May we recognize life's lessons in humility when they come to us from the hand of our loving God, for they *are* for our benefit.

The Paradox in Old Testament Prophecy

God's revelation that "the way up is down" did not suddenly begin with the New Testament teaching. The prophets had spoken clearly.

*He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you? To
act justly and to love mercy and to walk
humbly with your God.*¹⁶

*This is the one I esteem: he who is humble
and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my
word.*¹⁷

For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”¹⁸

Who are blessed with the joy of God’s friendship and the comfort of His presence as they walk through this life? It is the humble, the lowly of heart, the genuinely contrite of spirit.

The Paradox Presented in Biblical Personages

Concrete, historical examples of God’s exaltation of the humble also precede the New Testament revelation. Young David, although courageous and handsome, had been a keeper of the sheep for an obscure household in an uncelebrated hamlet of Judah. In a brilliant moment of faith sparked by righteous indignation, David put his life on the line for the glory of Israel’s God. He faced the belligerent Philistine giant with only a leather string and five smooth stones.

Although this incident catapulted David into a national acclaim that eclipsed even that of King Saul, we search David’s psalms in vain for a single clear allusion to this display of heroism. If David’s attitude had been that of many who claim to follow

Christ today, what would he have done? First, he would have written a book, lavishly adorned with color illustrations, entitled: “How I Killed the Giant.” Next, he would have assumed an official title (“G.G.K.”: Great Giant Killer), by which he would be introduced whenever he granted interviews or took to the lecture circuit. But read Psalm 51, and marvel at the humble, contrite spirit of this giant killer who became Israel’s most renowned king.

As the moonlight of Old Testament promise was about to give way to the sunlight of New Testament fulfillment, a solitary figure stood on the banks of the Jordan River. His name was John, son of Zechariah the priest; he would gain the nation’s attention as a prophet in the old tradition of Elijah, the fiery reformer. His was the responsibility of directing true Israel to her destiny, for the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God was at hand.

Except for Jesus Christ Himself, John the Baptizer stands out as human history’s most classic example of humility. As John’s gospel account begins, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem send a delegation to John. They ask whether he might be the promised Messiah, or perhaps a reincarnation of Elijah, or that ultimate Prophet whose coming Moses had foretold. John emphatically disowns all of these exalted positions, claiming no greater office than

that of “a voice.” John was content with humble anonymity. He was satisfied to rejoice with the Bridegroom as His friend, though some of his own disciples wanted greater honor for John. “I must decrease, and He must increase,” said he, of whom Jesus would later declare: “Among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”¹⁹

But consider what John might have said: “No, I am not the Christ—but I am the son of Zechariah, a priest of Israel. Not only that, but surely you have heard of my fame throughout all Judea as a great preacher of repentance and righteousness and readiness for the coming kingdom of God. No doubt, you already know that nobody has personally baptized more sinners than I have. And who, except Christ Himself, could be more important than the one who prepares the way for Him?”

John the Baptizer said none of these things, nor does his behavior indicate the slightest inclination even to think such thoughts. John was a humble man, but I fear that most of us would have fallen prey to the temptation of self-exaltation, had we been in John’s place. Perhaps we could have stifled any verbal vainglory before it escaped our lips. We might even have hidden our haughty eyes from other people. But could we have kept our *hearts* humble before God? In our “private” thoughts—

even in prayer—it is easy to succumb to the insolent pride of the self-righteous Pharisee, who said, “God, I think you that I am not like all other men.”²⁰

We are all susceptible to the “Little Jack Horner” complex:

*He stuck in his thumb
and pulled out a plum,
and said: “What a good boy am I!”*

“What a good boy am I.” Why, I’m already as good as Jesus, and getting better every day! (The audacity of such an attitude should drive us to our knees before our gracious and forgiving heavenly Father.)

The Paradox and the Peril of Jack Horner’s Plum

To *gracefully* receive a compliment is one of life’s most difficult challenges. We naturally tend to take compliments as if we were autonomous, self-created beings; that is, as if we were gods! We receive them without a word or even a thought of glory to God, our Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer. “What a good boy am I,” we say to ourselves, as we go our way in the quiet exaltation of our minds! Christian leaders need to be especially careful about lifting themselves up in arrogant pride.

The “Little Jack Horner” complex can strike anywhere, but I must question the wisdom of some who create breeding grounds for the virus of arrogance by the way they speak and write. It is common to hear preachers introduced with modifiers that recall the blasphemous pride of Herod Agrippa, who gladly accepted the people’s praise: “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.”²¹ Articles are submitted for publication in Christian periodicals that glory and boast, not in the Lord, but in “the great ones in our brotherhood” on the basis of their reputation and popularity.

Such speaking and writing can contribute to pride and can cause good men and women to stumble. We are weak human beings, susceptible to the temptations of pride, in all its subtlety. And God knows that we have witnessed the weakness of some people who have lifted themselves up in pride to the point of becoming repulsive and disgusting. These embarrassing displays of arrogance do not properly adorn the way of Christ.

The Paradox and Practicality

I am convinced that Christian teachers have done a great injustice by suggesting that some of Jesus’ teachings are idealistic and unattainable. The spiritual growth of God’s people is being stifled and discouraged by such false understanding. The surest way to

destroy hope, the most effective method of causing people to give up a quest before it is even really begun, is to set before them an unreachable goal.

Let us who teach the people of God first be ourselves assured and convinced that we can, by God's grace, become all that He has called us to become. We *can* become humble; we *can* learn to love as Christ has loved us, and to forgive as we have been forgiven. If, in the full assurance of faith, we would dare to take the smallest taste of the joy of genuine humility, we would desire to return again and again to the heart of Jesus, to drink more and more deeply of His humble spirit.

The Paradox and Parades

Men and women will learn humility from Jesus Christ, or they will not learn it at all. Jesus is the fountain of all genuine humility; to walk with Him is to walk in humility. The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as Israel's glorious King, Immanuel: "God With Us." But He was born in a barn at Bethlehem, grew up as a carpenter's son in a despised Galilean village, and became an itinerant preacher with no place to lay His head.

God might have been expected to enter His world by a dramatic appearance from heaven, such as will occur when He returns in glory. At least, He might

have been born on satin sheets, as any other heir to a throne would be. Should not the King of Glory grow up in a palace, amid wealth and splendor, as Moses did? *God* chooses the base things, the lowly and despised things in this world, so that the wisdom of this world might become foolish.

“Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”²²

How does the King of Glory present Himself to His people? “See, your king comes to you”—get ready for the next word—“gentle.” Meek, humble, lowly. He comes riding a donkey, not a white steed. He comes riding low, not charging in with all the splendor and pomp of human exaltation and pride. The people were ready to acclaim Him as their King, not on His terms, but theirs. “Hosanna, Son of David”—that is, “Save us now, O national King, from political oppression at the hands of Rome.” They were ready to crown Him without a cross. We have called this Christ’s “triumphant entry.”

Even today, there is this misconception called “triumphalism,” with its empty promise of a crown without a cross, exaltation without submission, glory without humility, and victory without surrender.²³ We still love a parade! But Jesus never forgot, not even for a moment, that the way to

glory was the way of the cross. The people might have misunderstood or forgotten for the moment, but Jesus didn't.

The donkey made it clear that Jesus knew where He was going. He knew that the humiliation of the cross lay before Him, and He rode the lowly animal deliberately toward that humiliation. And though He will return in triumphant glory and awesome majesty and power, He will never change:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.²⁴

He is not going to change His mind about the way of humility. He will not become bored with being humble and lapse into pride at some point. When His power and glory are unveiled at the end of time, He will be no less humble than He was during His lifetime on earth, or before He descended from heaven to be born of the virgin.

The Paradox Presented in the Gospel of John

John's gospel gives us a striking portrait of the heart of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Here we see "the great descent of God." Deity wraps Himself in human flesh in order to be "lifted up" before sinful mankind: first on a cross, and then into the glory which was His before the beginning.²⁵

What was the nature of divine glory revealed by the incarnation of Christ? It was a glory that sought the approval of God, not of men.²⁶ Jesus refused to be seduced by the allurements of pride, prestige, and popularity. Again and again, the motivating power of His life is attributed, not to Himself, but to the Father who sent Him: “Not *My* will...not *My* words...not *My* teaching...not *My* glory...All of it is not *Mine*, but is of the Father who sent Me.”²⁷ He made Himself nothing and the Father everything; therefore, to see Him was to see the Father.²⁸

Jesus could have easily reveled in selfish pride. The throngs were following Him, acclaiming Him as a great teacher and worker of wonders. He disowned all of the credit for His words and works. “*Not Mine*,” He said. “*Glorify the Father*.” Even in the agony of Gethsemane, facing the sufferings of the cross, He prayed to the Father, “*Yet not what I will, but what you will*.”²⁹

Here was true strength of spirit. The cross was not a spur of the moment decision for Jesus, but the fruit of the discipline of humble submission to the Father from before the foundation of the world.

The Paradox Prefigured at the Last Passover

John’s presentation of God’s “great descent” in Christ is vividly portrayed in the drama of the Passover meal with the disciples just before the passion

narrative. The parallels with Paul's understanding of Christ in Philippians 2:5-11 are unmistakable. The humble condescension of God incarnate, the Teacher and Lord, stripping off His outer clothing and washing His disciples' feet so that they might "have a part" with Him, is a picture of God the Son laying aside His heavenly glory to fulfill the role of the suffering Servant of the Lord.³⁰

The impact of the lesson is heightened against the background material supplied by Luke.³¹ The disciples are again so busy arguing about who will be greatest in Christ's kingdom that they fail to perceive and accomplish the lowly task of foot-washing. They would fight for a throne, but not for a towel and basin. God incarnate Himself, removing His outer garment and assuming the place of a lowly servant, performs the customary courtesy of washing dirty feet. He washes the feet of Judas Iscariot, though the lesson will be lost on the betrayer. The protests of Simon Peter do not deter Him.

He is still teaching, as He washes the feet of each self-centered disciple. The Lord's action of loving humility in washing His disciples' dirty feet is a dramatic analogy of what He had done in *laying aside* the form of His divine glory to be born of a Jewish peasant woman so that He might taste death for everyone. Only by thus *washing* away human

sin could Peter, or any of us, *have a part* with Him in His glory. He asked the disciples, “Do you understand what I have done for you?”³²

This is a sobering question, indeed. Like so many words and deeds of Jesus, the full meaning of this incident would remain largely a mystery until the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Indeed, the church has hardly begun to grasp the unfathomable riches of Christ, much less exhaust them. Some have bound the washing of feet as a church ordinance; no doubt, many will miss the *spirit* of the teaching in their zeal of the *letter* of it.

But perhaps we who view the washing of feet as a spiritual lesson rather than as a church ordinance are also missing something by never actually humbling ourselves to do for one another what our Lord did for each of His disciples. It is one thing to talk about “the point Jesus was making”; it is another to begin to practice loving humility toward others.

Loving Humility: Unquenched by Opposition³³

In our personal relationships, when another person mistreats, it is all too easy to seek vengeance and retaliation. We want to watch our enemies die, or at least see them suffer some “just pain.” Yet, the loving humility of Jesus was unquenched by opposition.

*The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus... For he knew who was going to betray him...*³⁴

Although treacherous Judas was about to betray Him, although cowardly he was about to deny Him, He lovingly served their need. He would go on to Calvary to serve their greater need, and ours as well. From the cross itself, He who taught us to pray for our enemies prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."³⁵

***Loving Humility:
In Full Awareness of Power and Position***

The loving humility of Jesus was exercised in full awareness of His own power and position. Although He was infinitely superior to His disciples, Christ deliberately humbled Himself to serve them. Love leaped the walls of class distinction, and the Maker of men and women became the humble Servant of mankind.

*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God...*³⁶

...Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.³⁷

He “made Himself nothing,” thought He is the Source of everything. Like Adam, we grasp for the forbidden fruit of “godhood.” Though He had always been God, He refused to cling to the glorious position. A grasping god is no God. But what would *we* do?

In our foolish pride, we believe that we have reputations to uphold; we waste tremendous amounts of time and energy pushing our pitifully puny egos through life. We would rather “save face” than save our souls by humble submission to Christ. We stand on our dignity instead of kneeling at the cross, kneeling with a towel and basin as our Lord did.

Do we not believe that God can uphold our reputation, if He thinks that it needs to be upheld? And what if He allows shame to befall us? What if He should strip us of our reputations, as He allowed sinful men to strip both clothing and flesh from His only begotten Son? Our faith in God is only as strong as our willingness to be humbled as low, low, *low* as He may see fit to allow.

No one wants to be shamed, but Jesus is our example:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.³⁸

***Loving Humility:
Activated to the Disagreeable Task***

Humiliating circumstances did not humiliate Jesus, because He *had already* humbled Himself beyond the shame of the cross. His humble submission to the Father's will looked ahead to the joy set before Him at God's right hand. Shame couldn't shame Jesus Christ, though it came to Him saying: "I am about to strip you naked before the world, and nail you to a shameful instrument of death; I'm going to torment you and mock you, and the whole world will rejoice in your misery and your shame and your death!"

Jesus had come to do the will of God; nothing could deter Him from it. He scorned shame; He despised it as unworthy compared to the joy that would come from drinking the bitter cup set before Him.

...so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into

*a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*³⁹

Loving humility was activated to do the disagreeable task. The disciples were willing to let their feet remain dirty during the whole meal, rather than humble themselves to do a "dirty job." Jesus, after waiting to ascertain that none of the disciples would act to meet the need of the occasion, took the initiative. At supper, Loving Humility did for the disciples what they could have done, but would not. At the cross, Loving Humility would do for each of us what we desperately needed, but could not do for ourselves.

*He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me...Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."*⁴⁰

*Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*⁴¹

Loving Humility: Cleansing and Communing

All of us have need of being cleansed by the one Lord, Jesus Christ. If we have bathed in His forgiving love at baptism, we still have a moment-by-moment need of being washed by the Lord, even as Jesus said to the community of disciples:

“A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.⁴²

Loving Humility provided for the cleansing of the redeemed community of believers. There was a distinction between those whose hearts were cleansed by faith in Christ, and the heart of Judas, the unbeliever. He was no longer a part of the community, and did not enjoy its privileges, because he did not believe. But even true disciples needed a moment-by-moment washing away of the sinful, proud self-centeredness that they had once decisively repudiated in order to follow Jesus.

If God’s people are ever going to learn to serve one another in loving humility (as Peter eventually learned to imitate his Lord and Teacher), we must humble ourselves under God’s mighty hand. We

must acknowledge our sins and failures; we must confess our continuing need of God's forgiveness and grace. We do not compete against one another for the prize of our heavenly calling in Christ Jesus; we are given gifts to humbly help one another in attaining the goal.⁴³ The Spirit of Christ speaks to today's churches with the same urgency in which he admonished the lukewarm Laodicean church.

“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”⁴⁴

James likewise addressed Jewish Christian communities which had forgotten their need of moment-by-moment humility before God?

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us tends toward envy, but he gives us more grace?

*That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the evil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*⁴⁵

No one is self-sufficient. We need help from the Lord, and from one another. We all have needs, but our greatest need is to learn the humility that will enable us to receive from the gracious hand of the Father. Jesus calls us to learn this humility from Him:

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*⁴⁶

The demands of discipleship to Jesus may be exacting to the point of exhaustion and demanding to the point of the cross itself. But the strengthening grace and joy that flow from fellowship with Jesus make self-sacrifice into a happy song, and denial of self a joyful dance.

The incarnate Word of God demonstrated what the written Word had already declared: *The way up is down.*

THE GREAT PARADOXICAL TRUTH CONFIRMED BY HUMAN EXPERIENCE

God's Purpose and Personal Involvement in Our Lives

God, in His providence and wisdom, knows how to humble the proud. He takes no delight in our humiliation; He treats us with the gentle firmness, the patient persistence, of a father training his son.

*Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness...without holiness no one will see the Lord.*⁴⁷

*And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*⁴⁸

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because ev-

*everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.*⁴⁹

*“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*⁵⁰

The author of Hebrews says that God is at work in the lives of His children, disciplining them so that they may grow in His likeness and enjoy His presence forever. The pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, praised the King of Kings for teaching him humility through humiliating circumstances. God’s purpose is not to humiliate us, but to persuade us (sometimes through humiliating circumstances) to humble ourselves before Him, so that He can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

People who persist in the fantasy of their own self-sufficiency are never able to come to terms with this reality: Only He who created our lives can possibly save them. Only our Creator can be an adequate Redeemer. If God will involve Himself in the lives of pagans to teach them humility, will He not remind His own children of the life-giving truth—that the way up is down? From my own personal experience of life in Jesus Christ, I’m certain that God knows how to humble His proud human creatures.

Ping Pong and God's Purpose in My Life

Everybody has a personal story about life's most humbling moment: an experience of humiliating circumstances through which a more realistic self-image was attained.

I experienced one such episode during the height of my reign as "King of Table Tennis" at Northeast School of Biblical Studies in upstate New York, where I was an instructor and dean of students. In the early days of the school, faculty and students would recess together in the lunch room for some friendly competition over the ping pong table. Eventually, I became a proficient ping pong player—at least, by school standards.

I had little doubt that the agonizing prayer of several students was that God would use them to depose me as the reigning King of Ping Pong! Those students who were about to graduate seemed particularly intent on defeating me at table tennis before it was too late. When the freshmen arrived to begin their biblical studies, they inherited the responsibility to "get the dean"—the "King of Pong." Being weak in my humanity, I entertained secret fantasies that I could conceivably become "The World's Greatest Ping Pong Player."

I received a phone call one day from a beloved Japanese sister in the Lord whom we had known since the days of my own biblical and ministerial studies. In the providence of God, this sister and her husband had met a young Japanese student. They befriended him, taught him the truth of the gospel, baptized him, and sent him on his way to meet his brother, who was coming to the States from Japan via Europe. Since he would need a place to stay in New York for a few days, I agreed to take this newly converted Christian into our home. Little did I realize that this young man, so polite and modest in the Oriental custom, was the very instrument that God had prepared to bring my “deceived mind” back to humility concerning ping pong.

After our young Japanese friend had spent several days with us, as we were talking, getting to know one another, I casually brought up the matter of table tennis. “Table tennis? Oh, you mean ping pong! I play...little ping pong,” he replied in his broken English. I knew he wasn’t trying to “hustle” me; his humility was honest. He was genuinely modest. I think he really meant what he said: “I play (a) little ping pong.”

I invited (or was it lured?) him to the basement for a few rounds of ping pong. He said, “Oh, I play with you, if you like.” I’m sure that, in my wildest fantasies, I had dreams of conquering a foreigner. I had imagined the glorious splendor of conquest, but I

had forgotten one thing: Orientals are the world's best ping pong players. Not only that, but in my folly, I thought I had one who knew little or nothing about the game. "I play a *little* ping pong." It is as dangerous to underestimate your opponent's modesty as it is to overestimate your own abilities!

I kept a record of my table tennis victories on the wall in our unfinished basement: names of "victims" and numbers of conquests. "You don't mind if I keep score, do you?" I innocently inquired. With his characteristic Oriental meekness, my young brother in Christ answered, "No, I not mind." Twenty games later, the writing was on the wall: visitor, 20; Larry, nothing!

That score stood inscribed on the wall as a written testimony to the lesson I learned that day. The Lord knows how to humble us. He loved me too much to permit me to get carried away with unrealistic fantasies. I *am not* the world's greatest table tennis player, nor do I really care about becoming the undisputed King of Ping Pong. What I really care about is being a true servant of God. And I want to learn every lesson I can about humility and submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered the shame of the cross for you and me.

Had Jesus been a Roman, He would not have been crucified, for the cross was considered too shameful a death for a Roman citizen. Paul, the

Roman citizen, was martyred by beheading, not by crucifixion. The Roman historian Tacitus said the cross was “a torture only fit for slaves.” The Jews regarded the cross as proof of God’s curse:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”⁵¹

Jesus died a death that was considered a shameful scandal by Gentile and Jew alike. Yet, by being lifted up on the cross, He continues to draw men and women of all nations to Himself. He resolved to accept whatever shame and humiliation might be in His path as He pursued the will of His heavenly Father. He looked beyond the shame and endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him. Will we understand that joy comes after humiliation? If we refuse to humble ourselves, then may God in His mercy humble us in whatever way it takes for us to learn and live the truth: *The way up is down.*

THE GREAT PARADOXICAL TRUTH DEMANDS A DECISIVE COMMITMENT

God’s Grace vs. Human Pride

God’s grace will not be a transforming power in our lives as long as we resist humility. Since God will not violate our free will, we tie His hands as

long as we persist in arrogant, selfish pride. Pride prevents people from accepting God's free gift of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It takes humility to confess that we don't measure up, we don't make the grade on our own merits. But even after true repentance and conversion to Christ, humility is essential in order for God's grace to transform us into what He wants us to be in His Son. The work of the Holy Spirit can be resisted by a proud, stubborn human heart.

The apostle Paul could have boasted in many of his attributes and attainments.⁵² As a Christ-rejecting Pharisee, he could boast in his racial purity, his religious uprightness, his external law-keeping. But in the crisis of confronting the Christ whose cause he had violently opposed in his proud self-righteousness, Paul began to learn a different attitude:

*I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me...*⁵³

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet, not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*⁵⁴

The Pitfall of Pride and the Preacher

Paul's conversion didn't end his struggle against the sinful attitude of self-centered pride. He seems harsh and unforgiving toward John Mark's weakness on one occasion.⁵⁵ He confesses to the struggle against pride in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians:

*To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*⁵⁶

Paul saw God's gracious providence in the midst of his pain and humiliating circumstances as a Christian. From these things, he learned moment-by-moment dependence on God's grace and power in Christ. And from our pain and humiliating circumstances, we also can grow.

We can learn to recognize and confess our human limitations, weaknesses, and sins. We can come to realize that words like "I'm sorry," "I was wrong,"

“I have sinned,” and “Please forgive me” do not become obsolete after obedience to the gospel.

One of the hardest things that a minister of God’s Word (Bible teacher or preacher) can do is to admit fallibility and error. After we have taught something publicly, a brother or sister comes to us with the Bible and says, “Have you thought about the possibility of this other interpretation?” Even though the error may clearly be a blatant contradiction to biblical teaching, rather than openly admit a mistake the congregation of God’s people, the preacher or teacher will often deliberately persist in error.

How refreshing it would be to hear more Christian leaders and teachers say clearly, to the whole church, “Brothers and sisters, I have a confession to make. As a human being, I sometimes make mistakes. I’m not God, nor do I have the gift of inerrant, divine inspiration. I would like to correct something I taught here.”

Pride Versus the Truth About Ourselves

There are many ways for pride to rear its head, even in the midst of God’s people—perhaps, *especially* in the midst of God’s people. The self-righteous Pharisees of the gospel accounts prided themselves most in their religiosity. Pride blinded them to the truth, not only about Jesus (that would be serious

enough!), but also about themselves. Could anything be more ugly than self-righteousness masquerading as the righteousness of God?

“Yes, I made a mistake once: I thought I had made a mistake!”

“I used to be conceited, but now there’s nothing wrong with me!”

Pride is a subtle temptation among God’s people.

...God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God.⁵⁷

The way up is down.

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Notes

¹Prov. 29:23.

²See Isa. 55:8-9.

³1 Cor. 1:27-28.

⁴A “paradox” is a truth which seems self-contradictory, but really is not.

⁵Mark 10:31.

⁶Matt. 10:39.

⁷Luke 14:11.

⁸Luke 9:48.

⁹See Luke 22:14-27; John 13:1-17.

¹⁰John 12:24-25.

¹¹John 5:41-42, 44.

¹²Rom. 5:2; compare Rom. 15:13.

¹³1 Peter 1:8.

¹⁴Phil 2:8-10.

¹⁵See James 4:6-7.

¹⁶Micah 6:8.

¹⁷Isa. 66:2.

¹⁸Isa. 57:15.

¹⁹Matt. 11:11.

²⁰Luke 18:11.

²¹Acts 12:22.

²²Matt. 21:5.

²³See 1 Cor. 4:8-13.

²⁴Heb. 13:8.

²⁵See John 1:1-18; 3:11-13; 6:33-38, 48-51, 58, 61-62; 8:23; 16:28; 17:5, 24.

²⁶See John 5:41-44; compare Matt. 6:1-18; Gal. 1:6-10.

²⁷Read carefully John 5:19, 30, 41; 6:38; 7:16, 28; 8:38, 42, 50; 12:49; 14:10, 24.

²⁸Phil. 2:5-11; John 14:5-10.

²⁹Mark 14:36.

³⁰See John 13:1-17.

³¹Read carefully Luke 22:17-30.

³²John 13:12.

³³The following four points are adapted from Merrill C. Tenney's *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1948), pp. 198-200.

³⁴John 13:2, 11.

³⁵Luke 23:34.

³⁶John 13:3.

³⁷Phil. 2:6-7.

³⁸Heb. 12:2.

³⁹John 13:4-5.

⁴⁰John 13:6-8, 14.

⁴¹1 Peter 5:5-6.

⁴²John 13:10-11.

⁴³See 1 Cor. 12:14; Rom. 12:1-8; Eph. 4:1-16; 1 Peter 4:10-11.

⁴⁴Rev. 3:17-18.

⁴⁵James 4:4-8, 10.

⁴⁶Matt. 11:28-30.

⁴⁷Heb. 12:10, 14.

⁴⁸Matt. 18:3-4.

⁴⁹Dan. 4:37.

⁵⁰Luke 14:11; 18:14.

⁵¹Gal. 3:13; compare Deut. 21:23.

⁵²See 2 Cor. 11:21-29; 12:12; Phil. 3:4-6.

⁵³Rom. 15:18.

⁵⁴1 Cor. 15:9-10 and compare Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:12-17.

⁵⁵See Acts 15:36-41.

⁵⁶2 Cor. 12:7-9.

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