

The Selflessness of Humility

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5 of 9 in *Navigating Relationships: Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs*

I'm glad to be back after some time away. We're continuing with our series *Navigating Relationships: Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs*.

Throughout this series, we've been talking about how relationships are essential for life. That's because each of us is created in the image of a *relational God*.

Christians are monotheists—we believe that there is one God. But we believe that God's oneness is not the oneness of singularity, but rather the oneness of *community*, a community that Christians call the Trinity.

By this, we mean that God exists eternally as a loving community of three persons— Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God's very being is therefore relational, so if you and I are made in God's image, it means that we've been made for relationships— with God and with each other.

This remains true whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, a people person or a private person. Yes, the way we approach relationships may be different depending on our respective personalities, but that doesn't change the fact that all of us need relationships, because all of us been created in God's relational image.

And of course, relationships bring joy, meaning and support to our lives. But in a fallen world, we also know that relationships can easily break down, bringing confusion, frustration and hurt.

As a result, we all face this dilemma: On the one hand, our hearts yearn for loving relationships, because we've been designed for them. On the other hand, we wrestle with, resist and sometimes even run from relationships, because as sinners, we know all too well that relationships can get messy, complicated and painful.

The question is, how do we navigate relationships in this fallen world? What we need is *wisdom*— and Proverbs is the Bible's premier book of wisdom. Old Testament scholar Gerhart Von Rad says that in the Bible, wisdom is all about having *competence in dealing with life's complex realities*. And would you all agree that there are few realities in life more complex than human relationships?

So, we need wisdom to navigate relationships. Biblical wisdom assumes knowledge, but it's more than that. It's knowing what to do with your knowledge. Biblical wisdom assumes morality, but it's more than that. It's knowing what to do in a relational situation where moral principles alone don't make the right choice any clearer.

For example, let's say you have a relationship challenge to navigate, and you're faced with this question: Should I speak out and confront the other person with directness and honesty? Or should I hold my tongue, and let the matter go? Both of those responses could be perfectly right and moral— *depending on the situation*. We see something along these lines reflected in Proverbs chapter 26. In one verse it says:

Don't answer the foolish arguments of fools, or you will become as foolish as they are. Be sure to answer the foolish arguments of fools, or they will become wise in their own estimation.¹

Don't answer a fool... Be sure to answer a fool... Which is it?

Well, in this complex, fallen world, sometimes you ought to confront a foolish person, and sometimes, it's better not to. How do you know the difference? *Wisdom*.

And as we've seen earlier in this series, wisdom comes from what Proverbs calls "the fear of the Lord" – which is not about being *afraid* of God so much as it is about having *reverence* for God. The fear of the Lord is about having a posture of humility that recognizes and actively seeks God as the ultimate source of understanding, insight, and competence for navigating life's complex realities, including the complexities of our relationships. That's the idea behind what the Bible says in Proverbs 9:

Fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment.²

What this means is that in order to gain the wisdom we need to navigate the complexities of our relationships, we need to lean into one primary relationship above all other relationships— our relationship with the Lord, who alone is all wisdom.

And this posture of humility before God— this holy fear of the Lord— which includes having a posture of humility toward other people— is absolutely essential for cultivating healthy relationships. Of course, the opposite of humility is pride. Proverbs has a lot to say about both pride and humility, and that's what we're going to focus on today.

Specifically, in the time that remains, we're going to talk about how pride hurts relationships, and how humility helps relationships. We begin with:

1. How pride hurts relationships.

- **It makes life a matter of comparison and competition**

For starters, pride hurts relationships by making life a matter of comparison and competition. That's because, according to scripture, pride involves the need to see yourself as better than other people in at least some way. This is evident in Proverbs 11, which says:

Pride leads to disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom.

It is foolish to belittle one's neighbor;
a sensible person keeps quiet.³

¹ Proverbs 26:4-5 (NLT)

² Proverbs 9:10 (NLT)

³ Proverbs 11:2, 12 (NLT)

Pride leads us to belittle our neighbour. It compels us look down on others. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote a famous chapter on pride where he explains that:

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next [person]... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone. ⁴

Lewis goes on to explain that proud people are not so much proud of being successful, intelligent or good-looking or what have you. Rather, they are proud of being *more* successful, intelligent or good-looking *than the people around them*.

When pride takes root in your heart, you will likely do a lot of what you do not so much because you enjoy doing it, but in order to make a case, to amass a resume to prove that you count—that you're a person of consequence, of worth—and more so than others.

So, pride hurts relationships by making life a matter of comparison and competition. Going deeper, pride hurts relationships because:

- **It puts self in the place of God**

In Proverbs 15 and 16, we read that:

The LORD tears down the house of the proud... Better to live humbly with the poor than to share plunder with the proud. ⁵

The particular Hebrew word used for “proud” in these verses is elsewhere almost always applied to God himself. It essentially means “supreme majesty.” To use this word of human beings, as these verses do, is ironic. It’s the Bible’s way of saying that the human heart wants to be its own supreme being, its own god.

We want to call our own shots, to run our own lives. We want ultimate authority to decide what is right or wrong for us. We want to find self-worth on our own terms, instead of finding it in God. As we anxiously search for our own sense of meaning, recognition and acclaim, how do we tend to see and experience other people?

Listen closely to this powerful extended quote from Christian author Lewis Smedes, who explains this so very well:

Pride... is the arrogant refusal to let God be God. It is to grab God’s status for one’s self... Pride is turning down God’s invitation to join the dance of life as a creature in his garden, and wishing instead to be the Creator, independent, reliant on one’s own resources... Pride is the grand illusion, the fantasy of all fantasies, the cosmic put-on.

The fantasy that we can make it as little gods leaves us empty at the center. Once we decide we have to make it on our own, we are attacked by the demons of fear and anxiety... We suspect that we lack the power to become what our pride thinks we are.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952: Harper Collins 2001) 122-123.

⁵ Proverbs 15:25a, 16:19 (NLT)

So we learn to swagger, to bluff... We force other people to act as buttresses for the shaky ego that pride created by emptying our soul of God...

Every new situation calls forth the questions: "What can I get out of this to support the need of my ego for power and applause?" As [the proud person] encounters new people, he wonders, "How can this person contribute to my need for applause and power?" He projects his own anxieties onto other people, so when others come to him he wonders, "What is this person's pitch? What does he want from me?" Life becomes a campaign to use people to support oneself and a constant battle to avoid having others use oneself that way. Vanity creates the need to use people because we cannot keep our balance spiritually if we are empty at the center."⁶

So, pride hurts relationships by putting self in the place of God, making us empty inside, which compels us to use others in a futile effort to fill that void. At the same time, it causes us to be suspicious of others, lest they try to use us in the same way.

A related way that pride hurts relationships is that:

- **It is self-absorbed**

It's a very good thing to have healthy self-awareness. But pride takes self-awareness to unhealthy extremes. Pride tends to make you hyper self-aware, to the point of self-absorption.

Proverbs 13:10 sheds light on this. It says:

Pride leads to conflict;
those who take advice are wise. ⁷

Let me share a personal example of the truth of this particular Proverb. For the past couple months, Jan and I been gradually working through some home renovations. We've relied on professionals to do the skilled work that we can't do ourselves (and we've especially relied on our amazingly handy and helpful neighbour, David Eastwood, who is also a Cornerstone brother). Still, there are any number of little projects left for Jan and me to do, and each one carries with it the potential to expose the pride that lurks in my heart.

Pride leads to conflict; those who take advice are wise. So, let's say I'm going to hang a picture, and Jan gives me some *advice* about how to do it: "Um, you're putting the nail up too high." Now in reality, what she's talking about is the nail, the wall, the positioning of the picture. But to my pride, what's she talking about? To my pride, she's talking about my competence, my ability, my intelligence. And in my pride, I might get all hot and bothered and respond by saying something like, "Don't you think I know how to hang a picture?"

It's a simple example of how pride leads to conflict, as the Proverb says. But those who take advice are wise.

The thing is, when I'm struggling with pride, my fragile ego is constantly calling attention to itself.

⁶ Lewis B. Smedes, *Love Within Limits: Realizing Selfless Love in a Selfish World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 34-35.

⁷ Proverbs 13:10 (NLT)

And if your ego is constantly calling attention to itself, not only does that lead to defensiveness and conflict, but it's also a sign that something deep within you is in need of healing. The same thing happens with our body parts. When your shoulder is working like it's supposed to, it doesn't call attention to itself, does it? That's why, on a typical day, you don't come home from work and say, "Wow, my shoulder felt great today!" If your shoulder is feeling great, it just functions the way it's supposed to, and you pretty much forget that it's there.

But if you've ever had a shoulder injury— and I've had a couple in my lifetime— it's a different story, isn't it? It aches, even when your arm is doing nothing more than hanging at your side. You see, your shoulder— or pretty much any other part of your body— only ever draws attention to itself when something is wrong with it— when it's wounded or sick and in need of special care and healing.

If your ego is always demanding your attention, it's a sign that your sense of identity is wounded and sick. It's a sign that your heart needs God's special care and healing. It's a sign that you need to be renewed in the fear of the Lord, because what your heart most needs can only be found in God. We'll talk more about that later.

But when we do look to God and his love to satisfy the needs of our heart, that's when we find ourselves in the best position to grow in the virtue of humility. And because humility is the opposite of pride, it should come as no surprise that humility helps relationships. Let's take some time to consider how it does.

2. How humility helps relationships.

Firstly, we see that:

- **It is marked by healthy self-forgetfulness**

In Proverbs 15, we read that:

Fear of the Lord teaches wisdom;
humility precedes honor.⁸

Humility *precedes* honor. In other words, there is an honor that is available only to the humble.

The word used for "honor" in this text is striking. It's the Hebrew word *kabod*, which means glory. It's a word that's often used to speak of God's supreme glory. And God's glory is what makes God a being of infinite weightiness, substance, and everlasting importance.

Something remarkable is being said here. It is the humble— those who are *not* out to pursue honor for themselves— that will receive lasting honor. It is the humble— those who are *not* out to prove how important they are — that actually become people whose importance, whose impact— whose glory— never fades.

Unlike prideful people, humble people aren't preoccupied with the pursuit of their own glory, honor and sense of importance. Indeed, humble people are self-forgetful people. I've often heard it put like this:

⁸ Proverbs 15:33 (NLT)

Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.⁹

This is incredibly important to appreciate, because all too often, we tend to think of humility as self-deprecation or low self-esteem. But ironically, those are just other expressions of pride, because they too are hyper-focused on the self. You feel like such a failure. You feel like you're no-good. You get down on yourself. Well, that's humility, isn't it? No, it's false humility. Why? Because you're still obsessing about yourself— as much as any swaggering person with a superiority complex would be.

People with true humility, however, doesn't think less of themselves; they just think of themselves less. C.S. Lewis says it best when he writes:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays... always telling you that... he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him, it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.¹⁰

And when I think of myself less, what happens? I have far more bandwidth to appreciate others for who they are rather than for how they either prop up or threaten my fragile sense of ego. When I think of myself less, I become freer to listen deeply to others. I become freer see and serve the needs of others. I become freer to value and appreciate the gifts and perspectives of others. I become teachable, freer to learn from God and from others.

In all these ways, humility helps relationships, because it is marked by healthy self-forgetfulness.

This connects directly with the next way that humility helps relationships.

- **It reflects God's self-giving character**

Proverbs 15 and 16 state that:

The Lord tears down the house of the proud,
but he protects the property of widows.

Pride goes before destruction,
and haughtiness before a fall.
Better to live humbly with the poor
than to share plunder with the proud.¹¹

What that last verse is saying is that humility is more valuable than all the silver, gold and precious stones that lay beneath the earth. Why? Because humility reflects the self-giving character of God himself, and by extension, it reflects the very principle by which God has

⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 149.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis Signature Classics (New York: HarperCollins Publishers) 128.

¹¹ Proverbs 15:25, 16: 18-19 (NLT)

always intended to order and govern the whole of creation, and by which he will ultimately set the whole of creation right in and through Jesus Christ.

Throughout scripture we see very clearly that God has a special place in his heart for the poor, the orphan, the refugee, the stranger, the marginalized, the downtrodden. Along these lines, the Proverb we just read says the Lord protects the property of widows.

This is about so much more than God having a soft spot for this world's underdogs, which he certainly does. It points to what God is after in all of human history.

In fact, if you go back to the beginning of human history, starting with the book of Genesis, you'll notice that in spite of that fact that in all ancient cultures, the oldest son gets all the power, God works with the younger son in every generation. It's Abel over Cain; Isaac over Ishmael; Jacob over Esau; Moses over Aaron. Again and again God does this, and it's clearly deliberate. Why does he do it? God does it to completely turn upside down the world's understanding of greatness and power.

In the same way, God flips the cultural script with women, working with barren Sarah over fertile Hagar, and plain-Jane Leah over ravishing Rachel. God works through Tamar, in spite of the fact that she tricked her father-in-law into getting her pregnant. God works through Rahab, a pagan prostitute. God works through Hannah, another barren woman, and through Ruth, a pagan widow.

Throughout scripture, in every generation we see God working with the girl that nobody wanted and the boy that everyone had forgotten. Why does he do this? Is it that he's got a certain sense of poetic justice? Is it because he's a romantic? No. There's something much more profound going on than that.

Because when this God— whose very nature is self-giving love— came into the world, he did so as a poor man. He was born to a teenage mom in a feed trough for animals in an unimportant, backwater colony, and for a period of his young life he grew up as a homeless refugee. You see, that's how the true God reveals himself to us. Contrary to the ways of the world, the Creator of the universe reveals himself in humility, and through his humility, he redeems us.

If you want to find God, then, what you must do, to borrow the words of an old Christmas carol, is to:

Seek not in courts or palaces, nor royal curtains draw
But search the stables, see your God extended on the straw.¹²

And as the New Testament tells us in Philipians:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,

¹² William Billings, *The Shepherd's Carol* (1786).

being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!¹³

Did you notice what Paul said in that passage? He said humble yourself— like God himself did in the person of Jesus— and do this in the context of *your relationships with one another*.

Having a mindset of humility— which reflects the very nature of our self-giving God who is ultimately revealed in Jesus sacrificial death on the cross for each of us and all of us— is what helps, heals and strengthens our relationships with each other.

But this is only possible through the third and final way that humility helps relationships:

- **It finds its sense of self in God alone**

There's no way you can live a life of relational integrity that reflects God's self-giving love in your own strength. But to return to a Proverb we looked at earlier:

Fear of the Lord teaches wisdom;
humility precedes honor.¹⁴

Again, the fear of the Lord is about standing before God's grace with reverence and awe. It's about worship. It's about letting God be God in your life, and when you do, it teaches you wisdom. And as we see in this Proverb, it teaches you the wisdom of *humility*.

So, a wise person— which is to say a humble person— finds their sense of self not in their pedigree, performance, in the opinions of others, or in how they seem to be doing in the comparison and competition game. The humble person finds their sense of self in God alone.

This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote these words to the church of Corinth:

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.¹⁵

This is an incredible statement. Paul is saying I don't care if I'm judged by you or any human court. And notice that he's not addressing a literal court here, but rather a Christian church. Which is to say that Paul has grasps that typically in life— even in church! — we find that our hearts are on trial. We find ourselves in a metaphorical courtroom, always trying to make our case, always trying to prove our worth, whether to others or to ourselves.

But Paul is saying he's escaped the courtroom altogether. He has stopped connecting his sense of self-identity with the opinions of others, or even his own opinion of himself. "I don't even judge myself," he says.

¹³ Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)

¹⁴ Proverbs 15:33 (NLT)

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:3-4 (NIV)

Because the trial is over. Therefore, if I do well today, it won't puff me up. And if I do poorly, it's not going to devastate me. Why? Because my self-worth isn't based on any of that. It's based on something else altogether, says Paul. *It is the Lord who judges me.*

And according to Paul in the book of Romans, here is how the Lord judges us:

But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. ¹⁶

That is the Lord's judgment. And so, Paul is out of the courtroom and you and I can be out of the courtroom as well, because Jesus went on trial for his very life, and in humility, received the verdict that you and I deserve, so that you and I can receive the verdict that he deserves.

Do you know what this means? It means that the verdict is already in, and that verdict is this: In Jesus, God loves and accepts you, not on the basis of your performance, but on the basis of Jesus has accomplished on your behalf through his death and resurrection.

The verdict is in: our very salvation is achieved through the humility of God in Jesus— a radical humility unto death. And salvation is also received through humility, because you have to admit that you need it. Tim Keller puts it this way:

The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. ¹⁷

When I acknowledge that I'm a sinner in need of a Saviour, I can get out of the courtroom because Jesus went into the courtroom on my behalf. In Jesus, God already loves and accepts me. It's not my performance that leads to this verdict. It's his verdict that changes me, and the way I live each day, including the way I relate to others. Because when I find my sense of self in God alone, I can go out and help people not because I want to earn credits, or recognition or regard, but simply because God's love is already at work in my heart, and therefore I want to show God my love by loving others as he has first loved me.

This is the very heart of how humility helps relationships.

But in order to live this out, we need to reinforce our sense of identity in Jesus each and every day. How can we do this? Tim Keller once said that he kept a slip of paper in his wallet with the following questions listed on it:

- Are you anxious?
- Are you afraid of how you're coming across to other people?
- Are you getting down on yourself?
- Are you being devastated by criticism?
- Are you looking down on anyone else?

¹⁶ Romans 5:8 (NLT)

¹⁷ Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2013), 44.

At the end of this list of questions, Keller added one single line that says, **COURT IS ADJOURNED!**

In Jesus, court is adjourned. You and I can live outside of the courtroom because Jesus went into the courtroom on our behalf. You've got to remind yourself of this truth again and again, ideally, daily. You might even want to use Keller's list. Reinforcing this truth in your life is central to what it means to live in the fear of God that shapes in us the wisdom of humility.

And to grow in this humility in this way will help your relationships.

Let's close in prayer...