

What A Difference A Humble Spirit Makes!

by Ron R. Ritchie

In these three messages we are dealing with the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ. Today, in John 21, we are going to look at a passage that will have a tremendous influence in our lives.

One Scripture that really gets to me is Jesus' words, "Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (Luke 14:11) It probably does so because I have spent the better part of my life exalting myself. I'm not sure I know how to humble myself. After we had studied this Scripture in a staff meeting once, however, it suddenly dawned on me that God would do that for me. Contrary to all rumors, one day Ron Ritchie will be humbled by God; I do not have to humble myself. But I can avoid a lot of pain if I jump the gun on God. It is my choice. If I humble myself, God will exalt me; if I exalt myself, God will humble me.

My Adamic nature has always struggled with the word humility. It seemed to describe weakness. In my mind this word pictures a man in the fetal position; he has a solemn look on his face; he has no sense of energy or drive. I was afraid that if I did become humble I would be taken advantage of, abused and run over in a hostile world that exalts pride and arrogance. In such a world the only way to get ahead was to join in and exalt yourself just like everyone else. So I did.

But then I became a Christian and I found that the Lord directs these words to all his servants: "Humble yourself or I will humble you through a series of physical, emotional or spiritual afflictions." This theme of humility runs all through the Old and the New Testaments. It is spoken to "natural" man, to the man who loves God, and to the nation of Israel. It is spoken to kings, to prophets and priests. It is stated so clearly that even a child can understand it. It is obvious, then, that I had a false idea of what humility meant.

I needed some examples from Scripture for this message from John so I turned to the New Testament, and the first example I came up with was Moses. I don't know about you, but I was taught in my Sunday School that Moses was a mighty man of God. He was the one who took on Pharaoh He led the people of Israel out of Egypt, took 600,000 people across the Red Sea, went into the wilderness, and saw the enemy defeated. When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments and found the people worshiping the golden calf he smashed the tablets of stone and told the Levite priests to kill all those who were worshiping. The priests killed 3,000 people, and Moses then ground up the golden calf and made the rest of the people drink the dust. He sounds like my kind of man. Once, Korah, Dathan and Abiram led a rebellion against Moses. He summoned them and their families and followers, and said, "Excuse me," the earth opened up and 250 people didn't show up for dinner. Then a plague went through the tribe and some 14,000 people were wiped out. Moses was my kind of guy.

But amazingly, the Scriptures say, "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." (Num.12:3) It is obvious then that I had a wrong definition of humility. How could a man like that write about himself and say in parenthesis, "and Moses was the humblest man on the face of the earth at that time"? Starting at the burning bush incident, which occurred when he was 80 years old, Moses immediately realized who he was and who God was. From that day on everything he did was totally dependent upon his relationship with the Lord. All his power, wisdom and courage, everything about Moses flowed directly from that. Moses gave his life over to God. That is what a humble man does. A humble man is totally dependent upon the Living God to express his life through him.

Humility...is absolute dependence upon God for everything in life

My next example is the apostle Paul, from the New Testament. How arrogant, how proud and boastful he once was. In Philippians 3 he lists his fleshly qualifications: "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the Law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of

the church, as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless."I...I...I. . . But this once proud and arrogant man writes in 2 Corinthians 3:5: "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant. . ." This is the new arrangement for living in Paul's life: Everything from God, nothing from Paul. That is humility; that is a man who is totally dependent on Christ.

My third example is Jesus Christ. Jesus' first encounter in his ministry is with Satan. Next he takes on the religious community, calling them "snakes, whited sepulchers." With a whip he drives the money changers from the temple area, saying, "You have made my house a den of thieves." Yet, speaking of himself, Jesus says, "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden 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 shall find rest for your soul." According to this definition, our Lord is saying that humility is total dependence upon the Spirit of God. It is the character of Jesus Christ under the control of the Spirit. Jesus said, "I don't do one thing without checking with the Father. Everything I do is the Father's will, through the power of the Spirit. "

I am discovering, then, that humility is an absolute dependence on God for everything in life--physical, emotional, and spiritual. Every moment of every day is to be lived in total dependence upon the resources of the Living God. There is no other definition of humility. I discovered that placing no confidence in the flesh but placing it in Jesus is humility. I discovered from the life of Christ that humility is strength under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Recently I was riding a big palomino on the beach at Half Moon Bay. This great horse stood 15 hands, but when I gently pulled on the reins he stopped. He didn't change his personality, he didn't change color, he was the same horse but he was under the control of my hands through the bit in his mouth. That is what the Lord has done with us. Look around this room. We are all different colors, different sizes, we wear different kinds of clothes. God does not want to change that; he just wants to change the control factor so that we will totally depend upon him. When the Spirit pulls the reins, he wants us to stop, that's all.

Someone has written, "Humility is the gift given upon graduation from the school of affliction." How humble many of you who have been divorced have become! How humble many of you who have been sick are becoming! How humbling to stand at the graveside of a friend! If we humble ourselves maybe we won't have to go through the affliction, I don't know, but all through the Scriptures we see that God has ways and means to get our attention if we are not humble. Remember that he is God, the Creator. We are the created; just keep reminding yourself of that. When you are proud, arrogant and boastful, you are trying to become the creator. That's dangerous. If you try to become the center of the universe, the last word, God will soon get your attention. Humility, by definition, excludes all pride, boasting, arrogance, self-confidence and independence.

Humility...does not place confidence in the flesh, but in Christ

This passage from John 21 rings with humility. The main characters in the story are the resurrected Lord, and Peter, the apostle. The issue is, Is Peter still qualified to be a shepherd of the church of Jesus Christ since he denied him at the Lord's trial a few days earlier? In his pride, Peter told Jesus he would never leave him. Even if the rest of the disciples did, he would not. In fact, Peter said he would die with Jesus.

The Scriptures record that Jesus made twelve post--resurrection appearances before the day of Pentecost. There were six appearances in Jerusalem up to this point. This, the seventh, is the first to occur in Galilee, and the third for the disciples as a group.

1. The Humble Fisher Man (John 21: 1-6)

After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias; and He manifested Himself in this way. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out, and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing. But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the

beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus therefore said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No." And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you will find a catch." They cast therefore, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.

The phrase, "After these things" (verse 1) refers to the six appearances of the Lord in Jerusalem. The disciples have gone to the Sea of Galilee, just like they were told to do (Matt. 26), where the Lord manifests himself in his resurrected body. He has come in power, in love and in tenderness to the exact area where James, John and Peter first met him, the day when he said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." They had left everything to follow him, and now, three years later, the wheel has come full circle.

Humility...is strength under the control of the Holy Spirit

Peter is there, the same Peter who, when Jesus said that the Messiah would suffer and die, said, "Don't do that, Lord." Jesus had told him, "Get behind me, Satan, for you don't know the mind of God." This is the same Peter who said in the upper room, "Don't wash my feet." This is the same Peter who was in the garden when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus. Peter stepped in with his sword and cut the right ear off the servant of the High Priest. This is the same Peter who said to Jesus, "I'll never leave you nor forsake you." But now some things have changed. No longer is he the prideful, boastful Peter. He has come at last to a place of humility. He is back where he began--fishing in the Sea of Galilee.

Some commentators take this to mean that the disciples have given up the ministry; they are not going to follow the Lord anymore; they are living in despair and hopelessness. I don't think so. Jesus had said to meet him in Galilee so the disciples are really being obedient. What do you do if you are waiting for a Lord who keeps appearing and disappearing? The disciples did what was most natural for them--they went fishing.

If you go to Galilee today you can see fishermen cast their nets into the sea, wait until the nets sink, and then draw them in. That is what the disciples were doing. They knew the lake, they knew the tides, and the seasons. They know exactly what to do; they were not novices, but they caught nothing. I can hear Peter saying, "I can't do anything right. My whole spiritual life is messed up. Now that I'm living in obedience, all I want to do is fish so we can have something for breakfast, but I can't even catch a fish."

Then this figure on the beach, about 100 yards away, says, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" "No," they replied. You have to understand that if you are a fisherman, this is not normal. I would have said, "Yeah we've got a lot of fish. They're on the bottom of the boat, otherwise we'd show them to you." There is no way I'd let any stranger on the shore know that I hadn't caught anything. Then the figure on the beach says, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you will find a catch." You have got to be humble to take the word of a stranger who is not even in your boat, but the disciples do as they are told, and the net is so filled with fish they cannot haul it into the boat.

I see four spiritual principles here. First, the resurrected Lord reminded his disciples once again that "without me you cannot do one thing_ even catch fish. Don't go fishing for men or for fish without me," he is saying. The second thing I see is that Jesus is reminding them of and reef firming for them his original calling, that they would become fishers of men. Third, the same loving Lord before Calvary is the same loving Lord after Calvary in his resurrection body. Nothing of his glory, his character, or his love for these men has changed. Fourth, the full net is a symbol for the ministry the disciples would have after the Spirit comes on the day of Pentecost. As their nets were filled with fish, so their lives (their spiritual nets), will be filled with men when the Spirit comes. These disciples were willing, in humility, to submit to the stranger on the beach, and their nets became full.

Humility...is the gift given upon graduation from the school of affliction

A man sat in my office recently and told me how successful he was in his business. "But just when the grapes of my success should be ripe for the harvest and taste so sweet in my mouth," he said, "they have turned rotten. My wife is upset and confined to a bed. My children are all messed up. I'm losing everything. What's

going on?" I said, "I've noticed that you are a religious man, but are you a Christian? Has Jesus Christ ever become Lord of your life?" He said, "Well, no." "Why not?" I said. He replied, "Because I'm afraid if I give my life to Jesus I will lose everything." I said, "Did you hear your own words a few minutes ago? You have lost everything. You've got nothing right now, so what is preventing you from allowing Jesus Christ to come into your life as Savior and Lord?" Then this beautiful 55-year-old businessman bowed his head like a child and, with the voice of a child and the heart of a child, this humble child-man let Jesus Christ become his Lord. I didn't ask him to do this, but he was sitting here in church last Sunday with his whole family. I would never think of this humble man as a weak man. He has had his greatest week of strength because he was not relying on his own strength. He had come to the place where he needed to depend on the Lord and God had enriched him.

I have entitled the second section (verses 7-14) "The Humble Breakfast Guest," because in this passage Peter does not say a word. That is so very out of character for Peter. Something has happened to him.

2. The Humble Breakfast Guest (verses 7-14)

That disciple therefore whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." And so when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work) and threw himself into the sea. But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish. And so when they got out upon the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid, and fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread, and gave them, and the fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

John, the disciple, said to Peter, "It's the Lord," and Peter threw himself into the sea. That was just like Peter; his impulsive body always went before his brain. When he hit the water he probably said, "What am I doing here? Why am I swimming 100 yards out when I own the boat?"

You have to ask yourself what is going on here. Why was it necessary for John to say, "It is the Lord," and why was it necessary to say it as though the others did not get it? Well, the disciples could not have told it was the Lord by his appearance. Mary Magdalene, remember, did not know who Jesus was until he spoke. It was his voice, his personality, that John recognized.

A second clue as to why John knew that the figure on the beach 100 yards away was Jesus was the great catch of fish the disciples made when they lowered the net. Three years earlier they had seen a similar miracle occur when Jesus told them to cast the net. John thought, "We've been through this before. It's the Lord."

I think Peter threw himself in the water because he wanted so badly to be with Jesus that he began to swim to shore. I don't think Peter had anything to say. He just wanted to hear confirmed again the fact that he was forgiven for his tragic denial of Jesus. He had run away from the Lord once, now he was swimming toward him.

Then Jesus told Peter to bring some of the fish which he had just caught. This time there's no questioning, no "Why me? Why do I always have to do all the dirty work?" Peter went right to the boat, pulled the net in, and counted the fish. "Lord, 153 this time." By saying, "Come and have breakfast," Jesus is demonstrating his servant role in a symbol of fellowship, forgiveness and encouragement. The principle here is that the resurrected Lord, the King of Kings is still willing to provide everything these disciples need. Jesus is still willing to model his servant role by cooking breakfast. That same resurrected Lord, the King of Kings, is our friend, our brother, too. He says to us, "Children, let's have breakfast. I've prepared everything for you."

Jesus now zeros in on Peter. The issue now is not fellowship, not forgiveness, but leadership.

3. The Humble Shepherd (25: 15-17)

So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him. "Tend My sheep.

The conversation was carried on by the charcoal fire. This is symbolic, because it was by a charcoal fire that Peter denied the Lord just a few days earlier. He had been sitting by a fire during Jesus' trial when a woman said to him, "Aren't you one of the followers of Jesus?" Peter replied, "I never knew the man." Then he moved from the charcoal fire to a porch in the area of the temple. Another woman said to him, "This man is a follower of Jesus of Nazareth." With an oath, Peter said, "I don't know the man." Then, about an hour later, according to Luke, some women came and said, "Surely you're one of the followers of Jesus; your Galilean speech gives you away." Peter began to curse and swear and said, "I don't know the man." Just then the silence was broken by a rooster crowing. Peter was devastated. Earlier he had said he would follow Jesus Christ even to the point of death, but Jesus' reply to him then was, "Peter, Satan has demanded permission to sift all of you like wheat, and I have given him permission. You will all forsake me, but you, when you return, strengthen your brothers, for I have prayed for you. "

Because of the three denials it was necessary for the Lord to ask three questions of a man whom God had been grooming to lead in his church. This was not to be a position of power or of authority, but one of a shepherd who was to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. So Jesus' first question of Peter was, "Do you love me more than these?" Some think Jesus was referring to the boats, the nets, the sea, etc. But I think what he is asking is, "Peter, there was a time when you said you loved me more than the other disciples loved me. You said you would even die for me, but you are the one who denied me. Do you really love me more than the other disciples love me? I doubt that. Do you 'agape' me? Do you have a self-sacrificing, whole-hearted devotion to me? Can I depend on that now?" Peter answers, "I want you to know that I'm not so sure." He has learned something.

Humility...is the absence of pride, boasting, arrogance, self- confidence, independence

In his book, "The Gospel of Belief," Merrill C. Tenney says:

Jesus was seeking to probe Peter's innermost purpose of following him. The desire for personal success, eminence, achievement, reward, or even the relatively unselfish motive of doing something for needy humanity was not enough. Only a complete love for Christ would be sufficient to carry him and his fellow disciples through their careers which awaited them in the future. Peter's response undoubtedly was sincere. He had learned by this time that he could not trust himself. But his heart was penitent and willing to obey.

Peter says, "Lord, you know that I don't 'agape' you but I have 'phileo,' I have tremendous affection for you." Here is a change in the Greek word for love. Peter is not ready to say, "I love you so much I'll die for you." Rather, he is saying, in effect, "Lord, I'm not putting my foot in my mouth again." Jesus said to him, "Then, tend my lambs. I want you to be a humble shepherd who will feed my immature lambs."

Then, Jesus' second question: "Peter, do you 'agape' me?" Peter answers, "Lord, you know that I 'phileo' you; I have affection for you." Jesus replied, "Shepherd my sheep and guide them into green pastures." Now Jesus' third question, "Do you love me? Do you 'phileo' me? I'll come down to your level. Do you really have affection for me like a brother?" Now Peter is grieved because the Lord is doubting that Peter even has that much affection for him. He is humbled by this, and with his new humble spirit he says, "Lord, you know all things, everything that is, and one of the things you know is my heart and my love and my motives. You fully understand that I 'phileo,' that I love you. At this point I'm not ready to say that I have self--sacrificing love

for you. I've learned my lesson." Jesus replies, "Tend my sheep. "

During the next 30 years, Peter continued in this process of becoming humble. He struggled from time to time, as recorded in the Book of Acts, in his dealings with the Gentiles and with the apostle Paul, yet he remained a faithful shepherd of the Lord's sheep. Writing at the end of his ministry to some Christians in Asia we see how mature he has become in his humility and his shepherding. 1 Peter 5: 1-4:

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow-elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of Cod among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of Cod; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as fording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Then Peter goes on to talk about humility:

You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders [your shepherds] and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for Cod is opposed to the proud [not just man; God is opposed to the proud] but gives grace to the humble [So you make the choice]. humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of Cod, that he may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you.

We are proud and boastful because we are afraid somebody will take away everything we have. But Peter's advice is, "Cast those anxieties upon the Lord. He will take care of you. "

What a difference a humble spirit makes! Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled by the Lord; everyone who humbles himself will be exalted by the Lord. It is your choice; it is my choice. If you like pain, affliction, sickness, depression, if you love to be jealous, filled with pride and arrogance, God will humble you. If you hate those things, if you want to submit your life under the mighty hand of God, if you want a life full of peace, joy, wholeness and patience by God's working in your life through a process of maturity, then humble yourself. Choose and God will take of you. He will exalt you; he will meet your needs. You will start to become exactly who God wants you to be, a man, woman, boy or girl under the control of the Holy Spirit, totally dependent upon God for everything.

John 21:1-17
Catalog No. 3645A
Ron R. Ritchie
April 18, 1982

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1996 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.