

What Is Humility?

One evening as a teenager I was sitting on the back lawn watching a thunderstorm roll in. For whatever reason, my thoughts turned to things of eternal import, and I started contemplating how I was doing with my life in general. I recognized that I defined myself in terms of my intelligence, and in fact, it was important to me to be more intelligent than anyone around me. I thought about that from an eternal perspective, and realized that that course would eventually bring me into competition with God, and even as a teenager I knew that was going to get me nowhere.

On my mission I struggled with a number of my companions over a number of issues, but one thought that was frequently in my mind was whether I was being sufficiently humble. At a critical juncture in those meditations a well-meaning district leader advised me to resolve differences with my companion by asking for forgiveness, even if I had done nothing wrong. In a very short time I adopted that practice as my response to all disagreement, with the belief that it was the most humble response I could choose.

A huge advance in my thinking about humility came from President Benson's address on pride¹. He placed pride in its context as the root of all sin, and addressed humility and service as the antidotes to pride.

A few years later I was called as Gospel Doctrine teacher in my ward. It became a standing joke in the class that in every lesson I would point out how true humility was the key to overcoming problems that we discussed during the lesson.

Through each of those experiences, my understanding of humility has grown and changed. I think I am starting to come to a true understanding of the doctrine of humility.

A scriptural passage that has long impressed itself upon my mind with respect to humility is found in Alma 32:12-16.

I say unto you, it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom; for it is necessary that ye should learn wisdom; for it is because that ye are cast out, that ye are despised of your brethren because of your exceeding poverty, that ye are brought to a lowliness of heart; for ye are necessarily brought to be humble. And now,

¹ Ezra Taft Benson, "Beware of Pride," *Ensign*, May 1989

because ye are compelled to be humble blessed are ye; for a man sometimes, if he is compelled to be humble, seeketh repentance; and now surely, whosoever repenteth shall find mercy; and he that findeth mercy and endureth to the end the same shall be saved.

And now, as I said unto you, that because ye were compelled to be humble ye were blessed, do ye not suppose that they are more blessed who truly humble themselves because of the word? Yea, he that truly humbleth himself, and repenteth of his sins, and endureth to the end, the same shall be blessed—yea, much more blessed than they who are compelled to be humble because of their exceeding poverty. Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, in other words, blessed is he that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe.

Alma's distinction between humble circumstances, humble demeanor, and true humility, has helped me at times when I was losing track of what true humility is. To me the purest and simplest definition of humility is to do God's will. As a consequence, there is no action, no behavior, no circumstance to which I can point that guarantees humility. Humility is an attitude of the heart with which we approach everything in life.

So for example, if I go to church to be seen of men, we would all agree that I am not being righteous. However, to me the key is that I am not being humble – I am going to church on my terms, not the Lord's.

If I avoid taking an action the Lord has commanded because I am afraid, that is also pride. Member missionary work springs to mind. My fear is an expression of lack of faith in my Savior.

I have discovered that, at least for me, offering true forgiveness requires more humility than repenting does². This is so because of two factors. First, when I am offended I feel that I have some measure of ascendancy over the offender, and forgiveness includes an admission that I was incorrect in that attitude. Perhaps another way of expressing the preceding is that in forgiveness there is an implicit recognition that, because of the atonement, the offense is not against me, but against Christ. However, there is another reason. In forgiving

² I guess an interesting extension to this idea is that for me forgiving is merely a form of repentance.

I am expressing faith in God that he will dispose of the situation appropriately, and it is not my place to seek the appropriate punishment for the transgressor. Faith and true humility are always closely linked.

A small extension to the previous thought is that if I fail to forgive myself after repentance then that is not an expression of humility at all; in fact, it is an expression of pride!³ I may have justified the behavior before, thinking that somehow I was humbling myself before God by not presuming to claim forgiveness unduly. What I was really doing was denying that God had the power to forgive. That realization made me squirm, because it started to attack some of the fundamental tenets of my behavior.

What about asking forgiveness when I had done no wrong? Although there may be a place for that in humility, I tended to use it as an attempt to avoid contention. My mission from God is not only to avoid contention, but to help others to do so also. In some areas where I feared contention I was actually in a position of authority where God expected me to teach the other person correct principles. I was only avoiding the issue. Defusing contention was good, but by refusing my responsibility to teach I was committing a sin of omission which can, in some circumstances, be more serious than the contention.

This realization finally brought me to the point I am at now. True humility requires unwavering compliance with God's will. If I am called to be a Nursery leader it is easy to accept that calling humbly and earnestly, and be a good Nursery leader. But if I am called to a very visible position, such as bishop or stake president, and claim I am not good enough for the calling, then I am not yielding my will to God's, and what some might call humility is still an expression of pride. Ouch.

In the end, humility is not abasing myself, nor exalting myself. If God requires of me to abase myself, and I do it, I am being humble. But if God requires me to act forcefully and visibly⁴, and I do it, that is also humility.

So humility of necessity leads to joy. If I am feeling miserable and life is not what I think it should be, I probably should examine myself carefully to see in what way I am exhibiting pride.

³ Richard G. Scott, "Peace of Conscience and Peace of Mind," *Ensign*, Nov. 2004

⁴ John 2:13-16