

# 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

## Humility

Presented by Michael Jensen

### I.

We all like humility, but it is a rare thing to find. As one writer put it, “The trouble with humility is, you can’t brag about it”. Humility is a wonderfully attractive and pleasant quality - for other people to have. In the seventeenth century John Selden said “Humility is a virtue all preach, none practice, and yet everybody is content to hear.”

When we are committed to success and beauty as we are as a society, then it is inevitable that we will celebrate arrogance and boasting rather than humility. Of course, you musn’t APPEAR to lack humility - everyone knows that that is a terrible mistake in Australia. But we become very good at promoting ourselves and ensuring that our good points are shown to everybody as much as possible. In the end, we quite comfortable labelling arrogance and pride as “self-belief” and we find attractive those who can list their best qualities and achievements. We will forgive a rampant ego because he or she will be good at what they do - and ego is the price you pay for genius. Muhummad Ali said “I am the greatest” - and we believe him.

### II

Lack of humility generally means thinking other people are not as good as you. It is a pride that leads to putting down others - when perhaps your legitimate pride in something about yourself means you become arrogant. It can be racism, or sexism... It can be because you are a bit of a fashion template and you keep meeting dags. Or that you have more education, or go to a more impressive school, or have a better job. Perhaps sickest of all - that you go to a better church than the next person.

We are also proud and arrogant as a species, aren’t we? Human beings have an altogether too high opinion of themselves. We are very self-impressed with what we can achieve, what we are able to know, the control we can have over our lives. There is a dangerous but popular arrogance in the trust we place in science and technology to save us from everything. It is the ultimate arrogance - that we can be God. This attitude began with Adam and Eve. It is perhaps best illustrated in the story of the Tower of Babel, where human beings thought they could build themselves into heaven via a skyscraper.

As media magnate Ted Turner once said, “if only I had a little humility, I’d be perfect”.

The is quite a lot in the Bible which tells us of the importance of being humble. Not just important: it is the way to be great. Funny, isn’t it? The way to real glory and greatness is - humility. The road to salvation itself involves our humble laying off of our pride. On the other hand, God repeatedly promises to cast down the arrogant and the proud.

In the Proverbs we hear how being humble is the truly wise way to be:

11:2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace/ but with humility comes wisdom.

15:33 The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom/ and humility comes before honour.

22:4 Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honour and life.

Funnily enough, the way to get honour is to have humility!

In fact, God himself promises to bless those who are humble. Ps 149:4 says “the Lord crowns the humble with salvation”.

In Isaiah 66:2 the Lord says this: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”

Humility before God is the right way to approach God. The right way to relationship with the Almighty God is through humility, and showing that in being sorry for sin and obedience to his word.

### III

Best illustration - Luke 18:9-14 - the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Finishes with the paradox of humility - “the one who exalts himself will be humbled; and the who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Luke 18: 15 - 17 - the little children. “The kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

What aspects of little childness? Tantrums and toilet-training? No, he means humility and dependence. How did I get that? Well, little children so obviously contrast in this way with characters in the story before and the story after: the Pharisee and the rich young ruler who confronted Jesus. Being like a little child may seem degrading and demeaning; but it is how to get into the Kingdom of God. It is essential because you have to be ready to treat God as God; you have to be ready to acknowledge you need his help; and you have to give him your trust and dependence. Hard to do, when becoming an adult is all about winning are freedom and independence.

Peter tells us to be humble, too. In I Peter 5 “All of you, 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”. God himself will lift up and exalt the humble.

But is there a great example of humility that we could learn from? In particular, has God shown any humility that we could copy? This might sound like a tough assignment because God is always on about his own glory, or his name, isn’t he? Reminding human beings of his power and his right to be God. So - is humility one of his attributes.

We see God exercising humility in the life and death of Jesus Christ himself. Let’s turn for a closer look at Philippians 2, where Paul starts out by telling them Philippians to be humble and ends up pointing them to Jesus as the perfect example.

2:3f “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

The humility which they exercise will be to consider others better than themselves. Arrogance and ambition and pride will destroy unity in the church. But humility will draw people together. By sacrificing rights, not demanding them, each person makes possible the oneness of the church. “Consider others better

than yourselves - doesn't mean "consider yourself as a worthless human being - rather it points to the way we should act, treating others as more deserving than we are.

Which of course is what Jesus did.

"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."

#### IV

In leaving the comfort and riches of heaven, Jesus did not demand an equal rank with his Father. He did not hang on to his glory among the angels. He literally emptied himself, poured himself out. He gave up his rights to take on human form. How offensive to the Prince of heaven to take on a smelly, painful human body and live among the dust of 1st century Palestine. He didn't get the red-carpet treatment, or come in a blaze of glory...

When famous musicians or film stars visit somewhere it is entirely different. Demand champagne, or strawberries, or limos or the royal treatment. Oprah on Sydney Harbour....etc.

But there's more -

"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!"

His humility did not end with his coming to earth in a human body. Jesus submitted even to experience a humiliating death - a criminal's execution! He gave his hands and feet to the nails that pinned him like an insect to the cross. That death which would redeem the world, came at the cost of the utter humility of the Son of God himself. It was a costly humility, wasn't it: it actually hurt him. It meant sacrifice. It was a costly kind of love.

**And this is the model for our humility.** That we too should be humble towards others, seeking their good above our own, asking after their needs, not complaining about our rights, but making sure that others are advanced. Not using the church as a channel for our ambitions or as a way of promoting ourselves, but letting others in the church use us.

Not being vain like the Pharisees, and contemptuous of others - but genuinely seeking the good of other people. Not being self-obsessed, but rather being self-sacrificing.

Of course, like the other types of love, in this world is so rare that it shines like a jewel.

One further complexity when talking about humility: I am aware that for some people humility is tough, but for others, humility is all too easy. Some people here will hear me talking about humility and immediately think "That's right - I AM a nobody. I am worthless, I am no good." Sometimes the words we use in church can give that impression: the Bible is saying that we need to flee from spiritual pride. The Bible is saying that we need to give up our independence from God and be like little children.

But we also know that it is really important to have what they call "self-esteem" - to be a person who thinks well of yourself, and even a person who loves themselves. The person who doesn't like themselves very much is a person who will do stupid things, a person who will have a lot of problems. For some people that may even be depression. Humility should not ever be denial of our self-esteem. Our sense of self-worth should come, not from our own verdict on ourselves, or from what our friends think of us, but from what God thinks of us.

**V**

In fact, true humility is not the same as hating yourself. It is truly humble to accept God's opinion of yourself: that you are worthwhile, at least worth dying for.

We do need to acknowledge our sinfulness and our humble dependence on God for forgiveness, but that needn't mean we think of ourselves as worthless.

All of this seems to be illustrated in J's life. When he met people who were proud he challenged them. But when he met people who thought they were pretty low, he lifted them up. Zaccheus, the little tax collector who climbed a tree. The sinful woman who bathed J's feet in perfume. The woman at the well who had had 5 husbands. All of these people came to Jesus empty-handed, knowing they needed him. And because of this they went away right with God.

**SO** - let us be humble!! Not too proud to accept anyone; not seeking our own advantage over others. Not turning church into a power play. And let us always keep before us that terrific image of Christ on the cross - humbling himself even to the point of death so that we might be lifted up.