

The Grace of Humility

By Jeremy Taylor

Born and educated in Cambridge, England, Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) was an Anglican bishop, theologian, and poet sometimes referred to as the "Shakespeare of Divines" for his gifted writing and poetic style of expression; he is frequently cited as one of the greatest prose writers in the English language. He is best known for "Holy Living" and "Holy Dying," two practical manuals that guide the reader into a deeper life of sacrifice and humility.

Excerpts from "The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living"

1. A Realistic Opinion of Yourself

The grace of humility is exercised in the following rules.

First, Do not think better of yourself because of any outward circumstance that happens to you. Although you may because of the gifts that have been bestowed upon you be better at something than someone else (as one horse runs faster than another), know that it is for the benefit of others, not for yourself. Remember that you are merely human and that you have nothing in yourself that merits worth except your right choices.

Second, Humility does not consist in criticizing yourself, or wearing ragged clothes, or walking around submissively wherever you go. Humility consists in a realistic opinion of yourself, namely, that you are an unworthy person. Believe this about yourself with the same certainty you believe that you are hungry when you have gone without food.

2. Do Good Things in Secret

Third, When you hold this opinion of yourself, be content that others think the same of you. If you realize that you are not wise, do not be angry if someone else should agree! If you truly hold this opinion of yourself, you should also desire that others hold this opinion as well. You would be a hypocrite to think lowly of yourself, but then expect others to think highly of you.

Fourth, Nurture a love to do good things in secret, concealed from the eyes of others, and therefore not highly esteemed because of them. Be content to go without praise, never being troubled when someone has slighted or undervalued you.

Remember, no one can undervalue you if you know that you are unworthy. Once you know that, no amount of contempt from another person will be able to hurt you.

3. Never Be Ashamed

Fifth, Never be ashamed of your birth, of your parents, your occupation, or your present employment, or the lowly status of any of them. When there is an occasion to speak about them to others, do not be shy, but speak readily, with an indifference to how others will regard you. It is said of Primislaus, the first king of Bohemia, that he kept his old work shoes by his side so that he would always remember his humble upbringing.

Sixth, Never say anything, directly or indirectly, that will provoke praise or elicit compliments from others. Do not let your praise be the intended end of what you say. If it so happens that someone speaks well of you in the midst of a conversation, you are not to stop the conversation. Only remember this: do not let praise for yourself be the design of your conversations.

4. Reflect It Back to God

Seventh, When you do receive praise for something you have done, take it indifferently and return it to God. Reflect it back to God, the giver of the gift, the blesser of the action, the aid of the project. Always give God thanks for making you an instrument of his glory for the benefit of others.

Eighth, Make a good name for yourself by being a person of virtue and humility. It is a benefit for others who hear of you to hear good things about you. As a model, they can use your humility to their advantage. But be careful among your own circle of friends, and do not let your good reputation be the object of your gaze. Use it as an instrument to help your neighbor, but do not use it for your own gain. Be like Moses, whose face shined brightly for others to see but did not make it a looking-glass for himself.

5. The Waters of Vanity

Ninth, Do not take pride in any praise given to you. Rejoice in God who gives gifts others can see in you, but let it be mixed with a holy respect, so that this good does not turn into evil. If praise comes, put it to work by letting it serve other ends than yourself. But be cautious and on guard that pride never enters in, thereby rendering your praise a loss.

Tenth, as in the Sixth rule, Do not ask others your faults with the intent or purpose being to have others tell you of your good qualities. Some will speak lowly of themselves in order to make others give an account of their goodness.

They are merely fishing for compliments, and yet, it is they who end up swallowing the hook, until by drinking the waters of vanity they swell up and burst.

6. The Devil's Whispers

Eleventh, When you are slighted by someone, or feel undervalued, do not harbor any secret anger, supposing that you actually deserved praise and that they overlooked your value, or that they neglected to praise you because of their own envy.

Do not try to seek out a group of flatterers who will take your side, in whose vain noises and empty praises you may try to keep up your high opinion of yourself.

Twelfth, Do not entertain any of the devil's whispers of pride, such as that of Nebuchadnezzar: "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built for the honor of my name, and the might of my majesty, and the power of my kingdom?"

Some people spend their time dreaming of greatness, envisioning theaters full of people applauding them, imagining themselves giving engaging speeches, fantasizing about having great wealth. All of this is nothing but the fumes of pride, exposing their heart's true wishes. Although there is nothing directly evil in this, it is the offspring of an inner evil and has nothing whatsoever to do with the obtaining of humility.

7. The Desire to Disparage

Thirteenth, Take an active part in the praising of others, entertaining their good with delight. In no way should you give in to the desire to disparage them, or lessen their praise, or make any objection. You should never think that hearing the good report of another in any way lessens your worth.

Fourteenth, Be content when you see or hear that others are doing well in their jobs and with their income, even when you are not. In the same manner, be content when someone else's work is approved and yours is rejected.

8. Focus on the Strengths

Fifteenth, Never compare yourself with others unless it be to advance your impression of them and lower your impression of yourself. St. Paul encouraged us to think more highly of others than we do of ourselves. Thus, it is beneficial to focus on the strengths of those around us in order to see our weaknesses more clearly.

When I look around, I see that one person is more learned than I, another person more frugal, another person more chaste, and yet another person who is more charitable, or perhaps less proud. If I am to be humble, I will not overlook their good virtues, or dismiss it, but rather, I will reflect upon them.

The truly humble person will not only look admirably at the strengths of others, but will also look with great forgiveness upon the weaknesses of others. The truly humble person will try to see how the sinful deeds done by others were committed because the person was unenlightened or misled, concluding that if the person had the same benefits and helps that he had, they would not have committed any such evil, but rather, would have done much good.

St. Paul said of himself, "I am the chief of all sinners." This is how we should all view ourselves. But this rule is to be used with caution: do not say it to others, but keep it to yourself. Why? Because the reasons you have for feeling this way (the knowledge of your sins) is not known to others the way it is known to you, and it may make them doubt the praise you give to God for all he has done for you. If you keep these thoughts to yourself, you will be much more able to give God praise and thanks publicly.

9. Virtue Scorns a Lie for Its Cover

Sixteenth, Do not constantly try to excuse all of your mistakes. If you have made a mistake, or an oversight, or an indiscretion, confess it plainly, for virtue scorns a lie for its cover. If you are not guilty (unless it be scandalous, do not be overly concerned to change everyone's opinion about the matter. Learn to bear criticism patiently, knowing the harsh words of an enemy can be a greater motivator than the kind words of a friend.

Seventeenth, Give God thanks for every weakness, fault, and imperfection you have. Accept it as a favor of God, an instrument to resist pride and nurse humility. Remember, if God has chosen to shrink your swelling pride, he has made it that much easier for you to enter in through the narrow way!

10. What Is Most Important to God

Eighteenth, Do not expose others' weaknesses in order to make them feel less able than you. Neither should you think on your superior skill with any delight, or use it to set yourself above another person.

It is told of Cyrus that he would never compete in any sport with his friends in which he knew himself to be superior to them. Instead, he would always compete in sports in which he was less skillful than his opponents. He did not want to prove his superiority by winning, but rather, placed more importance on learning from those who were more skilled while at the same time sharing in the joy of their success.

Nineteenth, Remember that what is most important to God is that we submit ourselves and all that we have to him. This requires that we be willing to endure whatever his will brings us, to be content in whatever state we are in, and to be ready for every change.

11. Increased by Exercising

Humility begins as a gift from God, but it is increased as a habit we develop. That is, humility is increased by exercising it. Taken all together, these rules are good helps and instruments for the establishing and increasing of the grace of humility and the decreasing of pride.

12. An Exercise for Increasing the Grace of Humility

Confess your sins often to God and don't think of them as scattered offenses in the course of a long life; a burst of anger here, an act of impatience there. Instead, unite them into one continuous representation of your life. Remember that a person may seem rather good if his faults are scattered over large distances throughout his lifetime; but if his errors and follies are placed next to one another, he will appear to be a vicious and miserable person. Hopefully this exercise, when really applied to your soul, will be useful to you for increasing the grace of humility.

Read the following Bible selection: Luke 14:7-II