



h u m i l i t y

*in
first-century
culture*

By Ray Wilkins

FOR THOSE RAISED UNDER THE influence of the Judeo-Christian worldview, humility is an accepted virtue. The opposite of self-preoccupation, humility seeks to avoid the elevation of the self over others. To brag about oneself and one's accomplishments is generally considered to be rude or at least to be in poor taste. Since he reflects our cultural norm, we are not shocked by Peter's instructions: "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another" (1 Pet. 5:5). Neither are we offended by his command to "humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God" (v. 6).¹

Some may be surprised to learn, however, that humility was not a universally accepted virtue in the first century. When Peter and the other apostles were giving ethical instruction to the churches, the dominant culture was Hellenism. With Alexander the Great's conquests, Greek culture, language, government, and religion spread from Greece eastward to the Indus Valley. With the rise of the Roman Empire, Hellenism and certain elements of Roman traditions merged together to form what is commonly known as Greco-Roman culture.

The Greek word most often translated "humility" is *tapeinos*. The basic meaning is to be lowly like a slave, or of no account.² How the Greeks viewed the word and the

social status it portrayed is made clear by the fact that they never used *tapeinos* in a positive way. The first known use of the term is by a Greek poet, Pindar; he used the term to mean "low."³ Plato spoke of humility as akin to groveling.⁴ He explained that humility is slavery and makes a person unfit to be a member of a healthy community. He also taught that to seek humility is to do great harm to the soul. On the other hand, Plato did not advocate a puffed-up sense of arrogance. Instead, in typical Greek fashion, he encouraged a middle way.

Aristotle, Plato's famous student, believed that both vanity and humility were vices to avoid. One should avoid vanity because the vain person claims too much respect and does not deserve it. Humility should be avoided because humble persons think they merit less than they actually deserve, a mindset that Aristotle disdained. If forced to choose between the two, Aristotle would choose vanity.⁵

Epictetus (AD 55-135), a first-century Stoic philosopher, wrote that to act in a lowly (humble) manner is to lack human dignity. Such persons have forgotten they are "citizens of one world" and "sons of one deity" who underlies their human dignity. Epictetus's statement is more significant because he was a contemporary of the New Testament writers.⁶ First-century Greco-Roman culture prized honor, which it defined as the affirmation of individual worth by one's peers and society. Children were taught to seek honor and avoid disgrace.⁷ A person received honor because of his or her ability to uphold the virtues of society. "Greco-Roman manuals on rhetoric attest to the importance of honor and to the way an orator would play on the audience's desire for honor in order to achieve persuasion."⁸ The society in which one lived determined what was considered honorable. Greco-Roman society and the smaller Jewish community held differing ideas

Right: From Lachish, Israel, and dated from 8th cent. BC, a basin for washing a person's foot. Once the basin was filled with water, a person would rest his or her foot on the raised platforms in the center. Jesus modeled humble servanthood to His disciples by washing their feet.



Right: Partial ruins of Tall el-Hammam (also called Abel Shittim), which is north of the Dead Sea in Jordan. Excavation work here has led some archaeologists to conclude this was the actual location of biblical Sodom. The entire

tell, which is the largest in Jordan, covers almost 90 acres. When praying for Sodom, Abraham asked, "Since I have ventured to speak to my lord—even though I am dust and ashes—suppose the fifty righteous lack five. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" (Gen. 18:27-28, CSB).

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DALE "GENO" ROBINSON (7/3/05)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ ISRAEL MUSEUM/ JERUSALEM (1/31/02/210)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (95/6343)

Above: Close-up of the large stone, which, according to tradition, Jesus stood on to get on the donkey and begin His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The stone is located behind a wrought-iron fence, inside the Franciscan Church at Bethphage.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ/ CARPTOLINE MUSEUM/ ROME (20/20/4)

Right: Victory scene of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180); those he's conquered are shown bowing to him. The Hebrew word for humility can refer to someone bowing down.

of virtue, but both taught their citizens to seek honor and avoid disgrace based on what values the society held as honorable. Greco-Roman society held humility in disdain, in large part because it represented self-abasement, which was the opposite of honor.

Valuing humility had long been a part of Israel's history. During the patriarchal period, although humility was not explicitly expressed in one's approach to God, it was implied in the physical posture of bowing low in worship.⁹ The gesture expressed surrender or submission to God. Abraham bowed before God at the oaks at Mamre (Gen. 18:2). When pleading with God to spare Sodom, he recognized that his status before God was as "dust and ashes" (v. 27). Moses learned humility during his exile from Egypt (Ex. 3:10-11). During Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, they learned humility (Deut. 8:2-5).

Whether God Himself or the trials and affliction of life humble a person, humility's proper work is to orient one toward God (Ps. 25:9). Solomon taught that God gives favor to the humble (Prov. 3:34). Centuries later, when Peter summoned believers to show humility, he echoed Solomon's words, "Toward the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor" (1 Pet. 5:5).

During the Assyrian crisis, the eighth-century prophet Micah spoke to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. As the people cried out asking God what He desired, the prophet responded by stating the Lord had already showed them what was required, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8). The prophet reminded them that humility before God was always the expected virtue.

Jesus, the Son of God, frequently expressed humility in His relation to the Father. "He did not claim for himself arrogant regal powers."¹⁰ He entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a symbol of humility (Matt. 21:5-6). He encouraged His disciples to be humble as He Himself is humble (John 8:50). He taught them to serve one another rather than lording over one another as the Gentiles do (Matt. 20:25-28).

Writing to the Philippians, Paul encouraged the believers to exercise humility and pointed to Jesus as the ultimate example. Although He is God, Jesus was willing to take on the lowliness of human nature (Phil. 2:6-11). Such should be the attitude of every believer.

When Peter, therefore, called upon Christians to willingly express humility toward one another, he was drawing from a rich biblical tradition, which viewed humility in a positive light and thus as a virtue. For those reared in the Greco-Roman worldview, the teaching of Peter and the other apostles, however, would have most certainly been troublesome, perhaps even revolting. 🕯

1. All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

2. Walter Grundmann, "ταπεινός" (*tapeinos*, humility) in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), 804.

3. Pindar, *Nemean Odes*, 3, 82.

4. Plato, *Laws*, 5.728e.

5. Jonathan Barnes, *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

6. Walter Grundmann, "ταπεινός" (*tapeinos*, humility) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3.

7. David A. deSilva, "Honor and Shame," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig Evans & Stanley Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 518.

8. *Ibid.*, 519.

9. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy eds., "Humility, Pride," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 567.

10. Patrick J. Hartin, "Humility," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, gen. ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 390.

Ray Wilkins is the senior pastor of Lebanon Baptist Church in Frisco, Texas.