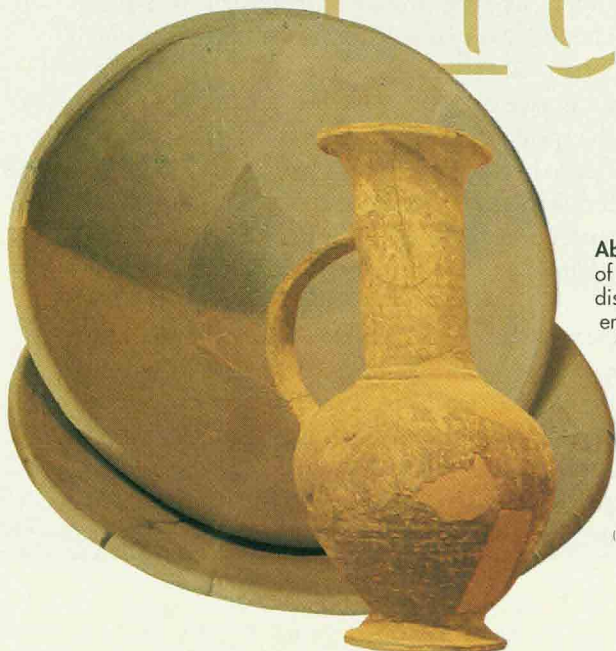


# Humility

by Kendell H. Easley



**Above:** An illustration of Jesus washing the disciples feet as they entered for the "last supper."  
**Left:** Pitcher and bowls from Hazor that might have been used to wash one's feet upon entering the house.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTOS/BOB SCHATZ/HAZOR MUSEUM, ISRAEL (10/20/7&10)

**T**HE ENGLISH WORD "humble" often expresses the positive attitude of "lacking arrogance" or "not haughty." We generally admire this kind of humble person. "Humble" can also express a neutral attitude of "deference to another person," as in "a humble apology." "Humble" also can convey the unde-

**Lesson Reference:**  
**EBS: 1 Peter 5**



sirable sense of “low status” on a social, economic, or other scale, as in “a humble dishwasher.” We do not usually aspire to this kind of humility.

In the New Testament five Greek terms belong to the “humility” word group and they occur 34 times. The first three are simple forms found in both the Gospels and the Epistles; the last two are compounds found only in the Epistles. The main idea for each, along with their frequency, is as follows:

- *tapeinos* (adjective)—humble, lowly (8 times);
- *tapeinosis* (noun)—humility, lowliness, humiliation (4 times);
- *tapeinoó* (verb)—I (make) humble, I make low (14 times);
- *tapeinophrón* (adjective)—humble in thinking (1 time);
- *tapeinophrosuné* (noun)—humility in thinking (7 times).

Matthew and Luke together account for 11 instances; Acts has 2; Paul’s Letters have 13 instances; James and 1 Peter have 4 each.<sup>1</sup> These terms are not found in Mark nor in John’s writings.

#### In Classical Greek

The original classical sense of the *tapein-* group was literal. The terms referred to an object that was physically low lying, below something else. Soon, however, *tapein-* words came to be used figuratively of persons. People were considered “low” for a variety of reasons. Usually this characteristic was undesirable or even shameful for the Greeks.

1. Being in poverty, with resulting low social or economic status;
2. Lacking freedom, being enslaved (actually, or those with a slavish attitude);
3. Being downcast or “depressed” (as in English, “I feel low”);
4. Groveling or flattering (in a negative sense);
5. Unassuming, obedient (in a positive sense, quite rare).

The two compound words (combined with the verb *phroneó*, “think”) developed later. In secular Greek these compound forms always had a strong negative sense as something to be avoided: thinking poorly or amiss, being faint-hearted, or having a cringing attitude.

*Tapein-* words occur in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) about 270 times, translating several Hebrew words. What is surprising is that the translators used *tapein-* words in a positive way as something for God’s people to desire eagerly. These are often placed opposite the pride that God hates. God brings down the proud and arrogant and blesses the lowly. A good example is Psalm 10:17: “O Lord, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will strengthen their heart, You will incline Your ear.”<sup>2</sup>

#### In Jesus’ Life and Teachings

Jesus did not teach in Greek, but the inspired gospel writers used *tapein-* words to report His teachings. He forever made humility desirable. He chose it, lived by it, and taught

it. Many of His first followers had low social or economic status, but He was more concerned that they reject pride. He said, “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29a). By coupling “humble in heart” with “gentle,” Jesus meant the attitude and behavior that rejects pretentious or arrogant ways. Those with this perspective live without having to be noticed. Paul explained Jesus’ attitude this way: “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

Matthew 18:1-14 records one of Jesus’ extensive teachings on humility. For Him, humility was a voluntary attitude rather than a social status imposed by life’s circumstances. He insisted that people express childlike faith to be part of His kingdom: “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:4). John’s Gospel does not use any of the *tapein-* terms. It contains, however, one of greatest examples of personal lowliness: Jesus washed the apostles’ feet as a common slave would (John 13:1-15).

#### In the Apostles’ Teachings

The apostles followed their Master in practicing humility. They chose to submit themselves to one another and to the Lord Christ. They rejected pride or self-seeking and never “strutted their own stuff.” Often the surrounding society responded by giving them low social status. A good example is Paul’s testimony in Acts 20:19: “[I was] serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews.”

This verse illustrates an interesting development. Paul used a compound form of humility (*tapeinophrosuné*), emphasizing that an humble mindset or attitude is the primary concern—despite secular society considering this to be shameful. A trace of the original negative sense is found in Paul’s warning to avoid humility for humility’s sake. There is a false humility that ends up being self-serving (see Col. 2:18,23, where *tapeinophrosuné* is translated “self-abasement” in NASB). Nobody is more detested than one who is “humble and proud of it.”

#### In the First Epistle of Peter

Of all the epistles that use the *tapein-* words, 1 Peter was likely the last to be composed. Peter masterfully used four different words in his four uses of the concept:

- “To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble (*tapeinophrones*) in spirit” (3:8).
- “Clothe yourselves with humility (*tapeinophrosunén*) toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble (*tapeinois*). Therefore humble (*tapeinotherte*) yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (5:5b-6).

In light of all we have learned so far, the original readers would interpret Peter’s teaching as follows:

1. I must understand humility based on its scriptural roots rather than its secular Greek meaning. First Peter 5:5 quotes the Greek Old Testament version of Proverbs 3:34 to reinforce its teaching. God hates proud people and blesses the humble, even though secular society may think such humility is disgraceful.

2. Humility is the willing attitude expressed when I reject pride, submit eagerly to God’s will, and put the needs of others first in word and deed. Nobody can force humility. It is voluntary. First Peter 3:8 is all about encouraging Christians to relate well to others; so is the fuller command of 1 Peter 5:5-6.

3. Jesus is my greatest Model of humility. Peter’s vivid picture of “putting on” humility as a garment (5:5) is surely based on his memory that once Jesus literally clothed Himself as a slave and washed Peter’s feet (John 13:1-15).

4. Active humility may result in my having low status before people, but one day God will give high status to all His humble followers. One early Greek meaning of “humble” was “having low social status.” Jesus’ followers are sometimes despised or ill treated (given low status by society) because they submit to God and put others first. When this occurs, believers are to be confident in spite of their adversity. In due time God will exalt them and openly confess that they are great in His kingdom (Matt. 18:4).

<sup>1</sup>The 34 times *tapein-* words appear in the New Testament are: *tapeinos*: Matt. 11:29; Luke 1:52; Rom. 12:16; 2 Cor. 7:6; 10:1; James 1:9; 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5; *tapeinosis*: Luke 1:48; Acts 8:33; Phil. 3:21; James 1:10; *tapeinoó*: Matt. 18:4; 23:12 (twice); Luke 3:5; 14:11 (twice); 18:14 (twice); 2 Cor. 11:7; 12:21; Phil. 2:8; 4:12; James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:6; *tapeinophrón*: 1 Pet. 3:8; *tapeinophrosuné*: Acts 20:19; Eph. 4:2; Phil. 2:3; Col. 2:18,23; 3:12; 1 Pet. 5:5.  
<sup>2</sup>All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 update.

**Below:** Inside the south theater at Gerasa (modern Jerash). The theater was built in the late 1st cent. A.D. and completed in the early 2nd cent. A group of Jordanian school children are in the scene. Jesus insisted that people express childlike faith to be part of His kingdom.

