

The Clothing of Humility - Putting on the Garments

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‘Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble’ (1 Peter 5.5).

What an amazing exhortation this is in these days of assertive self-confidence! As Christian believers we are to be ‘subject one to another’, not assertive, not resistant to advice, not resistant to mutual admonition between ourselves, but ready to respect the experience and light of others. Then there follows this powerful command – ‘be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.’

The Greek means something like this: clothe yourself as you would for some physical, menial task. Put on an apron, or some other protective clothing, and be ready for action.

Humility, therefore, is a virtue which must be consciously adopted and maintained, like an over-all. This is Peter’s equivalent to Paul’s Christian armour in *Ephesians 6*, except that Peter focuses entirely on humility. Through prayer, we must don the protective clothing of humility to know the continuing favour of God, and to experience blessing in his service.

The clothing of which Peter speaks is not merely a jacket or a hat, it provides total protection, because we are vulnerable to all forms of pride, intellectual and spiritual, also pride in our gifts and our accomplishments. Humility is the only garment that can protect us from so many arrows of pride.

Do you make good judgements about different situations? If you do, the likelihood is you will become proud of this ability, and you will soon be exercising your own overrated human judgement on all kinds of matters rather than applying the principles of the Word.

Intellectual pride is a near neighbour, causing people to care more about being recognised for their gift than about using it humbly for the Lord. John Calvin remarked that ‘everyone has in him the soul of a king,’ and that is the trouble with pride. It creeps into us, and if we do not consciously resist it, we soon become ugly and repugnant in the sight of our Redeemer and Lord.

Pride has been described as being like weeds in a garden, kept at bay only by relentless hoeing and plucking. More than forty years ago, my wife and I had two reception rooms in our house knocked into one, the central wall being solid brickwork. Everything was sealed up to protect the rest of the house against the dust, but you cannot keep brick dust from penetrating everywhere, and for weeks that dust continued to settle. Pride is just like that.

It is like a virus attacking your computer. You need protective systems to keep it out, and they have to be revised daily to maintain security. If we do not realise that pride attacks constantly, and if we dream along with the idea that we can check our pride situation once a month, we will certainly become deeply infected victims.

Spurgeon said that if the last enemy to be destroyed is death, the second to last will be pride. Of course, he was speaking imaginatively, but how penetrating, polluting, tenacious and destructive pride is! One of John Newton’s devotional poems shows how pride (he calls it ‘self’) may wreck even zeal. Here are just three stanzas:–

Zeal is that pure and heavenly flame

The fire of love supplies;
While that which often bears the name
Is self in a disguise.
But self, however well employed,
Has its own ends in view,
And says, as boasting Jehu cried,
'Come, see what I can do.'
Dear Lord, the idol 'self' dethrone,
And from our hearts remove;
And let no zeal by us be shown,
But that which springs from love.

When we are in a condition of pride we readily talk about ourselves, and even if our words are not blatantly boastful or self-preening, we nevertheless advertise ourselves, whether by word or – these days – by blog.

The point is that pride gets into every aspect of the Christian life if we do not prayerfully don the clothing of humility. Do we know where to find this clothing, and what we are looking for? Do we put on the clothing of humility every day, constantly updating our resistance to pride? It can be done (with the Lord's help) otherwise we would not be commanded to do it.

Forgive the simplicity of this illustration, but we must open the wardrobe of the spiritual life, and as our eye ranges across the garments hanging there, we must recognise and select the following parts of the clothing of humility.

1 Think More of Others than Self

Firstly, humility will think less of self and more of others (*Philippians 2.4*). How do we become clothed with humility? When we find ourselves thinking too much about ourselves and our concerns, whether hunting for self-advantage, or feeling sorry for ourselves, we must offer emergency prayer to God and switch off this whole train of thought, turning our minds to the affairs of others and praying for them. Humility thinks more of others than it thinks of self. Through prayer and desire, with the putting to death of self-centred thinking, and the conscious redirection of our minds to the needs of other people, especially their need of the Gospel, we put on the clothing of humility.

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2 A Servant Spirit

Secondly, humility is ready to do anything for the Lord. It never recoils from any necessary task saying, 'I am not doing that; it is beneath me. It is unreasonable to ask it of me.' If something is advantageous to the cause, or will relieve the distress of others, humility is always willing to do it.

This is not only the standard for every believer, but it is a good test or measure of our humility. I remember hearing about a young man who had just secured his PhD in theology and been appointed as an assistant pastor. He sent a letter to the church leaders listing all the things that were beneath his dignity, such as putting out chairs for his youth meeting.

Humility thinks like a servant, firstly of the Lord and also of others. The model of Christian life in the New Testament is that of a bondsman who is always looking out for the wishes of his master, and this is exactly our ideal attitude. Nothing is too much for a bondsman of Christ. Will we take up work in the Sunday School, teaching or driving a collecting vehicle, or setting up and clearing away? Or is it inconvenient because we like to rest, or read, or visit others for social pleasure, or even watch television?

To be clothed with humility means there will be nothing we will not do to please Christ, and also to assist other believers, whatever their needs. Everything we have will be at the disposal of our Master, because humility is servanthood. Nothing which needs to be done for Christ is too much trouble or too lowly for the humble person, and putting on the clothing of humility means that we tell ourselves this every day.

3 See Our Own Weaknesses

Thirdly, humility is always ready to see one's own weaknesses and to try harder. It is naturally inclined to self-examination and self-assessment, and it is determined to be more diligent and to learn.

Humility really believes in constant improvement, and values criticism. It is ready to see relevant points even in hostile and unreasonable criticism, because its greatest concern is to please the Lord and to advance the cause. It is willing to be shaped by circumstances or by people, especially by husband or wife, and even by children. Prickly self-defence is a symptom of pride, whereas the clothing of humility is a longing to improve.

To put on the clothing of humility includes a daily review of sins and faults, whether of thoughts, words or deeds, whether of sins committed or duties not carried out. Pride skims over self-examination, or practises it only occasionally and superficially, but the baring of one's heart to God in daily repentance fosters a humility which is genuine and lasting.

4 Seek no Recognition

Fourthly, humility is willing to go unrecognised, unthanked and unpraised for what it does, however unfair it may seem. As soon as the thought enters the mind: 'No one ever thanks me for what I do; I have received no acknowledgement and no thanks,' humility sweeps that thought aside, counting every act of service a privilege from the Lord. True humility bears no -resentment.

Moses was the meekest of men, who for most of his leadership of the Israelites received little apparent praise to sweeten the undying unreasonableness of the people. The Saviour himself endured constant hostility, and so did Paul. They were certainly loved by many, but opposed and attacked by many more.

Humility keeps no record of ingratitude and refuses to think about it. So let us put on the following garment: a constant sense of gratitude and privilege that we can serve the Lord and other people.

5 Never Unpleasant

Fifthly, humility is never rough, abrasive or unkind toward other people, nor does it have a critical spirit. It is pride that returns evil for evil, that cannot bear being offended or decried. It is pride that

criticises and finds fault in everything but itself. To be clothed with humility is to adopt a determination to maintain a courteous reaction to everything outwardly, while remembering that we represent our Lord and Saviour in every situation.

Great care is needed to avoid the habit of criticising others. The devil knows that if he can plant a critical spirit in us, our pride will be boosted far more than by flattery or riches. We must test all things, and criticism in the right spirit is needed to maintain the purity of doctrine and practice in the church. But an innate negative spirit is by its nature superior, arrogant, despising and self-blinding, all at the same time. We must tear away from us the perpetual fault-finding tendency, even when it appears in subtle form, such as in a sense of humour which majors on ridiculing other people and their ways.

To put on the clothing of humility means to adopt a positive, kindly, supportive, encouraging spirit whenever possible, never rushing to assume the role of spiritual magistrate over others.

6 Always Approachable

Sixthly, humility is never aloof, but approachable by others. It will always accommodate others, never utilising coldness to discourage conversation or fellowship. It will engage with both the youngest and the oldest fellow believer, and embrace all sorts and nationalities. It has the spirit and disposition urged upon us in *James 2*, where the poor man is to be welcomed and respected just like the rich. And, of course, humility forgives and forbears, major words featuring repeatedly in the New Testament.

It is pride that will not let go of offence, but the garment of humility is always ‘peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated’ (*James 3.17*).

7 A Good Listener

Seventhly, humility is more than approachable: it is a good listener, willing and patient with others, their point of view, their ideas, their hopes, their pains and their woes. Humility is patient and sympathetic, ready to hear out a person’s case before making a response.

Pride is hasty, always thinking it has something better to do, and if it imagines it knows the solution to people’s problems it will cut them short with its pronouncement before they have fully explained them.

Humility respects other people, especially fellow believers, feeling it owes them helpfulness, and remembering the immense debt it owes to past help from others. Pride never remembers its indebtedness to other believers, and feels no duty to younger saints today. To put on humility means to adopt a listening spirit.

8 Uncomplaining

Eighthly, humility does not complain about its present lot in life (God’s providence) but happily obeys the command: ‘Be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee’ (*Hebrews 13.5*).

Humility never forgets that believers have grace, life, spiritual understanding, communion with God, guidance, help, Heaven and every conceivable blessing, so that any circumstances that God has appointed in this world are his gracious will and calling.

This does not mean that we should not strive to improve our earthly lot. If someone is living in one room and has an unfulfilling job, of course he should do his best to get a better situation and better accommodation. Parents should desire a good home for their children where possible. But such

things should not be pursued as a proud quest for superiority and luxury.

If unsatisfactory conditions can be changed, then we should do our best to change them, but if they cannot be changed for the present, we should be willing to glorify God in them, and trust in him. Humility wants and accepts God's will, and trusts his wise providence. Humility prays for relief, certainly, but until it comes, trusts the Lord and submits to him. Humility remembers *2 Corinthians 12.7-10*.

To put on the garment of humility is to shun unnecessary luxury in possessions or clothing, to avoid the cult of designer labels, and to pursue a reasonable lifestyle. (Nothing inflames pride like luxury and superior goods.) And the clothing of humility is donned when we suppress murmurings and complaints about our earthly portion.

9 Knowledge-Seeking

Ninthly, humility always wants more knowledge of the Word. It takes a very realistic view of how little it already knows of the deep things of God, and pines for greater understanding and appreciation of God's being and ways, of how he deals with his people, of what he has in store for them, of his promises, of how life should be conducted, and of how problems may be solved from a right use of the Word.

Humility never says, 'I know much; I can slow down; I am well equipped.' It never preens itself on having been in the kingdom for many years.

It feels its need, fearing the consequences if personal devotions should be missed, and glorying in the syllabus of learning, which lies ahead all the way to the end of life's journey.

Humility in a preacher, Sunday School teacher, or witnessing Christian is always improving its manner of presentation and approach, feeling these are never good enough. To put on humility is to put on the lifelong task of refinement, and making progress for the Lord our chief happiness and labour.

10 Thankful in all Things

Tenthly, humility thanks God constantly. Do we drive a car? How often do we complete a journey in safety and step into our home without remembering that God should be thanked? Pride wants to give the credit to skilled driving, but humility knows that it is by the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, and thanks him for every journey safely completed.

But we should also commit to God every journey, or at least pray for help at the beginning of every day. If this seems unreasonable, then it is pride, not humility, that has taken hold of us. Of course, this extends far beyond driving, because true humility commits all activities to the Lord in prayer. Only pride finds this tiresome and excessive. Dependence upon God and specific gratitude to him is a vital part of putting on humility.

11 No Mental Fantasies

Our eleventh characteristic of humility is that it does not construct mental fantasies or daydreams that place self on centre-stage as the star performer. It does not write a script of self-exultation. Many good people will testify to having done this, speaking of how when riding on a bus, or walking about, or doing something 'mechanical', the mind has enjoyed creating its own 'soap', imagining some situation in which self is the outstanding person.

This is a particular pastime with many young people, but humility is not at all keen to be celebrated by this personal, inner fiction. It may seem harmless, but it is seldom humble, and humility sees

the offensive elements, and keeps clear. Self-elevating daydreams and mental fantasies feed pride and involve putting off humility. To don the clothes of humility we should always have ready a better 'thought agenda' in line with *Philippians 4.8*, thus avoiding the snare of vain imaginings.

12 View Christ Much

Our final feature of humility is really the first and greatest. Humility makes much of Christ. Whenever his works and attributes are extolled in worship, humility truly admires and praises him. In personal reading of Scripture, humility pauses at every view of Christ, reflects and admires him. No sight of him is passed over lightly or taken for granted, so that our values and tastes are continuously primed and shaped by him, and we want to be like him, and conformed to his image. Paul states the principle in *2 Corinthians 3.18* – 'But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.' To admire Christ above all else, and to emulate him, is to put on the clothing of humility.

Motivation to Humility

Returning to the apostle Peter's words we find powerful motivation to strive after humility – 'for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble'. These are jolting words, and if we look at their context it becomes obvious that God resists not only the unconverted proud, but in great measure he resists the converted proud also. God will resist us if we allow the weeds of pride to choke humility.

The word translated 'resists' means that God stands against us. In other words God, acting like a military commander, sets his forces against the proud. The word presents a picture of an advancing enemy that runs into an impassable barrier of soldiers deployed by a wise defending general. God does this to us if we are proud. And if we should try to break out to the left or to the right, seeking another route for our pride, God is ready to head us off and surround us so that we cannot move.

If we are proud, God arranges himself against us, bringing us to a halt, so that every aspect of our spiritual life is stunted. He will no longer teach us anything as we study the Word, or give us any rewarding insight, or impart any comfort or pleasure. Guidance will also be withdrawn, and instrumentality will be certain to cease. We cannot be used by God as his -representatives while we harbour pride, which he hates. He is set against us, and calls us to a dead stop in every grace.

Because we have given in to pride, the Lord may deliver us over to our besetting sins, whatever they are. Perhaps our self-control will fail us, so that we lose our temper and react badly to circumstances. In the past, self-control has been placed within us and maintained by God in answer to prayer, but once pride has brought about the termination of our graces, there will be many a fall. Our supply lines of grace and help will be cut. If this should happen, we had better submit early or else the outcome will be very sad for us.

We have an exposition of how God may 'resist' his people in a challenging verse in *Hebrews 12* (quoted from *Proverbs*) – 'My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.' In this verse we are warned not to despise the gentler punishments or chastisements of the Lord, because if we do there will eventually follow a more severe rebuke.

We may think of the severe flooding in parts of Britain not so long ago. These are complex matters and we cannot comment on them too confidently, but such floods would appear to be a warning from the Lord on account of the evil and unbelief of our society. But while distressing for many, what a gentle discipline it was, bearing in mind the minimal loss of life!

Tragically, any possibility of spiritual warning was dismissed with contempt by our hardened society. So what will come next? If our land utterly refuses to contemplate any lessons that come from such troubles, or to recognise that we have a Creator to whom we must give account, when will the next level of chastisement come, and what form will it take? The gentler rebuke, if ignored, must be followed by a far greater one. Will it be soon? We cannot tell, because God, in his secret will, determines how long his patience will wait, but when punishment comes it will be very much harsher than the preliminary warning.

Applying this to our individual lives, if God has taken measures to frustrate our pride, will we ignore him and wait for the much firmer discipline?

Amazing Grace

However, let us turn our attention to an entirely positive and surprising part of Peter's words: 'God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.' It is only by God's help that we ever improve in humility, and yet what does he do? He rewards us for that advance. The Lord is so gracious that any growth of humility attracts still more grace. What an amazing principle this is! It is rather like money making money, because humility makes humility. He gives 'grace to the humble'.

In other words, if we secure humility through prayer and 'putting on' the clothing or standards, God will give us yet more help in our spiritual lives – more power over sin, more answers to prayer, more blessed interventions in life, more deliverances, more help, greater usefulness, greater wisdom and discernment, more insight, more love, more gentleness, more benevolence, more faith and greater forbearance and patience. Oh to have more of these blessings!

Will God give us more of these graces? Yes, if we pray for and work for humility, because he gives grace to the humble. He sets himself against pride, but increases the flow of grace which streams towards the humble.

'Humble yourselves,' says Peter, 'under the mighty hand of God.' Humility is against the basic instincts of the corrupted human heart. A voice within tells us that we cannot possibly live in the prescribed humble manner because we will constantly need to assert ourselves, look after ourselves, struggle for dominance, and maintain our self-esteem. But, says Peter, you will see the success of humility if you place yourself under the mighty hand of God, with your trust in him.

Say to yourselves, 'Nothing is too hard for him. He has never let me down or forgotten me in the past, and whatever my circumstances I may rely on his help. If he calls me to go through deep waters, I will say that his providence is perfect. Whether I am being trained for something new, or tried in order to prove him, or fashioned to be a future comfort to others in difficulty, whatever the reason, I will live under his mighty hand and not let go of the quest for humility.'

Promised Exaltation

Peter then adds a great promise. We are to be humble – 'That he may exalt you in due time'. I used to think that this chiefly referred to the end of life, as though Peter said, 'Hang in there, whatever your difficulties, because at the end of life's journey he will exalt you.' But 'due time' means, in the time appointed for you, which could be very soon in life, and not just at the very end. At the right time, according to his perfect will, God will exalt us, lift us up, and bless us with instrumentality and joy, if we humble ourselves under his mighty hand.

Finally, on the subject of humility, Peter says: 'Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you'. Once again, I used to think that this simply meant that when we had worries and burdens that we could not manage, we just had to cast them on the Lord, knowing that he cares for us and

would do something about them. The verse certainly includes this meaning, but also says something more. The word translated 'cast' is used elsewhere in the Greek New Testament in *Luke 19.35* where we are told that garments were 'cast' upon the colt on which the Lord rode into Jerusalem, receiving the hosannas of the people. The word 'cast' means 'fling upon', as if a sudden, energetic act is in mind, showing that the people willingly, eagerly gave their outer garments for the service and recognition of the Lord. They did it for him.

Here, also, in Peter's exhortation, the casting word does not mean that we wearily lay our troubles at Christ's feet for him to solve, but that we eagerly dedicate them to him as an act of service. Whatever can this mean? It means we say, 'I am going to count all my burdens as my service for him, to trust him, prove him, witness to him and draw near to him. I am certainly going to bring them before him to ask his help, but I am also giving them, offering them, to his service as part of my witness, and I must triumph in them through him. People must be able to think of me and say, "In all those trials he loved the Lord and proved him. He maintained his calm and humility."' "

If only we would do this the Gospel of grace would shine out of us in all circumstances, and people would be all the more touched, affected and impressed by the -Gospel.

Just as the people laid their clothes on the colt for Christ, we will give him all our trials as part of our service to him. We put our problems at his disposal, as well as handing them over to him for help; then they minister humility to us.

John Wesley went as a missionary to Georgia, proving painfully unsuccessful. In his manner and deportment he was obviously of upper-class stock, and very aware of it, often dealing haughtily with people of 'lesser breeding'. He was an authoritative gentleman-scholar, but failure humbled him greatly. Back on the shores of Britain he began to call humbly upon the Lord, and only then could he become a leading instrument in the mighty Great Awakening that began in 1739.

George Whitefield was also prepared for his role in the Awakening by a gift of humility. The Lord used circumstances and events to make him a very humble man, so that he could be mightily used.

It was the same with Martin Luther rather earlier. We like to think of Luther as a strong, bold, self-assured person, especially when he nailed those 95 theses to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, marking the beginning of the mighty Reformation. But Luther had become very humble before the Lord, knowing well that from that point on he would have no career in the church, no career in the monastery, no career as a lecturer in the University of Wittenberg, no promotion, no approval, and no acceptance. To obey his conscience he would have to give up all former aspirations and pretensions, and become a clerical outcast and rebel, and that was just the kind of person the Lord needed to be privileged with grace upon grace, and extraordinary instrumentality.

We see the same principle at work with C H Spurgeon. Considered naturally he was a brilliant, exceptionally gifted man, but what did the Lord do to prepare him for his life's work? He denied him the means for a prestigious college education and sent him to a little, out-of-the-way backwater named Waterbeach, where he preached in a thatched church to cottagers, and took spiritual responsibility for a cluster of villages. There the Lord forged his instrument, giving grace to the humble.

If only we could all be more humble within ourselves! I do not mean that we should affect or pretend a form of humility in our outward manner, but that in our hearts and our minds and in our relationships humility may reign. What grace would then be ours! So we must pray for it and work for it, watching all those tendencies to pride, and we must do this constantly.

'Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.'