

What Goes Down Must Come Up

Outside of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was the greatest man that ever lived? If we took a poll among Christians, I'm sure we would find a plethora of answers. We'd all have our own ideas about who was or is the greatest human being who has ever lived. We'd have different ideas as to what constitutes greatness. We'd disagree on the criteria of what makes a man or a woman great. Fortunately, our Lord Jesus gives us a clear indication as what makes a person great in God's eyes.

"Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 18:4

"But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant..."

Matthew 20:26

"But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted."

Matthew 23:11-12

The smaller, the bigger. The least, the greatest. The servant is the leader, the child is the greatest. What is going on? According to the Lord Jesus, the ingredient of greatness is humility.

You see, Heaven's gravity is reversed – what goes down, must come up. The way up in God's kingdom is down, through humility. The one who will be great in God's kingdom is the one who gives up their desire to be great. The one who will be exalted in God's kingdom is the one who is willing to be humiliated for God. The one who will be honoured is the one not looking for honour.

This teaches us that humility is not something you can grab at to use for your own ends. It is like trying to catch a little fox that is too quick and too smart for you. The minute you think you are humble – you are not. The minute you realise you are proud – you are getting there. But humility is not some spiritual 'trick' you can use to climb the spiritual ladder.

It is something you are to be, and the blessings are there. God is not shy to promise us reward. He is not afraid of telling us what blessings await us if we will be humble. But ironically, if you try to be humble to get your own way – you have missed it altogether.

Why is humility the key to being great in God's eyes? Indeed, why is it the most important thing with regards the Christian life? Because humility is putting yourself in the state to allow God to work. When all is said and done – the things of greatest value will not be what you did for God. It will be what God did – and what you allowed God to do – through you. All that will ever be of value is what you allowed God to do in your life. And humility is where I get myself out of the way, and into position.

You can try and please God in your own strength, or you can please God in His strength. You can seek to live the Christian life by your own hand, for your own glory, or you can seek to do it for God's glory by His power.

Inn **Matthew 11:11**, Jesus Christ states who the greatest human being was: *“Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”*

Here is the thing – John the Baptist was the greatest, and yet the one least in the kingdom is greater. Why is that so? I believe the answer lies in John’s own words, where we will find a beautiful description – and profound definition – of humility:

And they came unto John, and said unto him, “Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptiseth, and all men come to him.” John answered and said, “A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before Him.’ He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all.”

John 3:26-31

Here is John the Baptist’s remarkable testimony – and evidence that the core value of what made John so great was his humility. John was a man who has been the centre of Jewish religion for some time. Disciples are following him. He is the first prophet to break the 400-year silence after Malachi. He has the respect even of some of the Pharisees.

Now, his disciples come to him with news that would worry a proud man: ‘Master – the one you were bearing witness to – everyone is flocking to Him. He’s stealing your thunder. You’re losing popularity and followers, and He’s gaining. You helped Him, and He’s just moving on!’ You can almost hear the misguided loyalty in their voices. What does John say? His response show us the depth of his humility.

1. Humility starts by understanding its role

Firstly, John shows that he understands his role: he knew his role was *“the friend of the bridegroom.”* John says – I am not the groom. I’m the friend. That’s who I am. John does not pretend to be the groom, or to try and steal the day from the groom. No, he rejoices in his role as friend.

Imagine a best man at a wedding seeking to be the centre of attention. What would we think of a man who kept trying to act like the groom, when everyone knew he was the best man? We’d think, *“Sit down, stop it! It’s not your day, it’s his!”* Now, guess what – you think you’d get annoyed with such a man. Well, like Nathan the prophet said to King David, and like the Word says to you and me, *“Thou art the man!”* You see, every day, you and I live our lives like we are the groom.

What do I mean? Jesus Christ is the central point of all existence. He is the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. He is the Author and Finisher. By Him all things consist. One day, God will essentially gather together all that is for His Son’s glory. **Philippians 2:10-11** tells us that one day every knee will bow, and every tongue confess – including the knees of fallen angels, including the tongues of men who rejected Him – *all* will confess that He is Lord.

In other words: He is the groom. It's His day, so to speak. Today, yesterday, tomorrow, the day after – everyday is His day – because He is the centre of it all. He is the focal point of history, He is the groom, all attention is to be on Him. It's always His day.

Yet, how we live our lives like we are the groom. We think it's our day. We think life is about us. We think God made us to fulfil a need inside Him, and therefore He needs us. Our lives reflect a thinking that I am in control of my life, I am authorised to live in a way I see fit, and it hardly crosses our thoughts that Jesus is the centre of life. Life that does not have Jesus at the centre is off-balance. Life that does not have Jesus as the groom, which does not regard today as His day – is out of touch with reality.

Humility is really embracing reality. It is seeing life as it is. It is understanding your true role – your true identity. It know Jesus is the centre – I am not. Jesus is the Creator; I am the creature. Jesus is the Saviour; I am the saved sinner. Jesus is the Lord; I am the servant. Humility is not thinking less of yourself than you ought, or pretending to be this snivelling, self-deprecating worm. It is agreeing with God when He says, 'My Son is the centre of the universe, you are not.'

What then is your role?

Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.

Isaiah 43:7

Your role is to return glory to God. That is your and my design instructions. We were made to reflect God's glory back to Him. And since Jesus according to **Hebrew 1:3** is the brightness of God's glory – we are to be reflecting the image of Christ back to the Father. Nothing makes Him prouder or happier. My role is to reflect God's glory so that He may look upon me and say – that is like my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Humility begins when I believe and accept my role is to be a mirror. I am a reflector. That's why so much of this psychology and self-esteem teaching is unbiblical. A mirror doesn't need to have a good self-image. It doesn't need a self-image at all. It reflects someone else's image. My role as a saved human being is to reflect God's glory back to Him. That is why God created Adam.

In whose image did God make Adam? In His own. He made Adam, among all the creatures and animals, to be a new special creature – a spiritual creature clothed in physical form – the representative of God on this earth. And as Adam walked with God every day in the cool of the day, he was enjoying the surpassing joy of reflecting God back to God.

But when Adam sinned, that mirror became cracked and marred. Suddenly, the mirror wanted its own image. In the most twisted of ways, the mirror believed it should no longer reflect, but be reflected. The mirror wanted a self-image. It wanted a self-identity. Satan tricked Eve into believing that God was holding out on them. He tricked her by saying, essentially, 'You ought not to be merely a reflector, you ought to be one who needs reflection. You should be a god as well.' All sin is basically pride – a desire to serve myself, and please myself, instead of the groom Jesus.

Christ came to die and rise again so that we might be reconciled to God. With our sins forgiven, and by the process of sanctification, we can begin to enjoy reflecting God back to Himself in ever increasing amounts. And now, the process of shining and cleaning off the dirt that obstructs the reflection of Jesus begins – taking a whole lifetime.

Humility is being in touch with reality

Pride is simply the belief of lies about yourself. Pride is the deception that says, 'ye are gods.' Pride says, 'I am the groom. I was made for my glory. I deserve to be reflected.' Humility believes the truth with all its heart – Jesus is the groom. I am not the groom; I am a reflector of the groom.

Here is a fact: Jesus is going to be first. He will be Supreme. He is and will be exalted to the highest place of all. You are either agree with that fact, and act like it – or you are living life as if you can or will be first. The momentum of the universe, the momentum of history, is moving towards the supremacy of Jesus Christ. You're either with that or against that. So humility begins by understanding reality: Jesus is first, and will always be. History is His wedding day – all the time, every day.

2. Humility has the correct reaction

Once John understood his role, he had the correct reaction. He said, *"He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all."* John realised, Jesus is above all – He is first, He is supreme – so his reaction was, *"I must decrease, and He must increase."*

See, if there is a train coming through the room you are in, the correct reaction is to get out the way. If the Creator of the universe says, 'I am going to glorify Myself,' the correct reaction is, 'You must increase, I must decrease.' Because John realised, 'I am not the bridegroom,' he was not jockeying for position or applause. John understood that his role as the forerunner of the Messiah was now coming to an end as the Messiah Himself was now taking centre stage.

But there is an application for us too. It is that my Christian life must be marked by an ever-increasing presence of God, and an ever-decreasing presence of self. All that is sinful and selfish must be killed, starved and destroyed, to make way for the glory of God.

Put it this way: humility that understands its role reacts with a passion for the firstness of Jesus. See, if a mirror understands it is a mirror, it reacts by acting like a mirror. If I believe and know I am a reflector of Christ, then I will have a passion to make Him first in everything. The 'firstness' of Jesus must saturate my life. I must decrease – so that He can increase. He must always and everywhere be first.

Didn't Jesus say the most important command was *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"* (**Matthew 22:7**)? That's His firstness. Isn't the first command of the ten commandments, *'Thou shalt have no other gods but me'* (**Exodus 20:3**)? That's His firstness.

Notice for His firstness to grow in our lives, there will have to be a decrease of something else. What is that? Sin in our lives. Everything selfish and un-Christlike will have to go to make room for Him. That's the "put off, put on" principle of **Ephesians 4:22-24**. You need to be turning away from sin and saying no to Self, and in its place putting on Christ.

See, humility is not God wiping away your uniqueness. It's not God wiping away your talents, or even parts of your personality. No, it's removing what is unnaturally there – sin. The desire of a mirror to reflect itself. That has to go. As you stay in His Word and sit under good preaching in a Bible-

believing local church, God will show you what sin needs to go, to be replaced by obedient imitation of Christ.

Less of me – more of Him. Emptied of Selfishness and filled with the Spirit. That's the reaction. And here's why living in this humble way makes us great in the kingdom. It's not because of how great we are. It's because of how great God is – and the humbler we are, the more room there is for God to manifest His greatness.

Humility is cleaning out the pipe so more of God can flow through. Humility is washing the mirror, so the image is clearer. The less there is of my selfish desire to be first – the more God will be first in my life. And because He is first, and is great – that makes such a one great. You are exalted, simply because you are carrying the name and image of one so great. Even Jesus lived this way when He was on earth. He kept pointing out that it was not about Him, but about His Father:

“The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.”

John 5:19

“I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.”

John 5:30

“...and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please Him.”

John 8:28-29

Jesus was saying, ‘My Father has plans and a will. I am obedient to that. I am moving with His momentum. I want Him to be first. I always do the things that please Him.’ That's firstness – ‘I always please Him first – I move and act for Him.’ Too many Christians are running around trying to do things for God, instead of co-operating with what God is already doing. They want to make the agenda, instead of agreeing with the one God has set – to glorify His Son. As such, they miss out on great blessings and true power.

Remember Jesus spoke about the Christian life in **John 15** where He called it ‘*abiding*.’ Well, abiding is simply humility. A branch realises it is not the vine, it is a branch. It knows so long as it stays intimately attached to the vine, the vine's sap will flow into it, and it will bear fruit. The branch cannot produce fruit – it can only bear it, and only as long as it remains attached to the vine – not seeking to be a vine in itself – but giving glory to the vine, by bearing fruit.

Here's the thing: the bigger a branch, the more sap flows through it, and the more grapes it will produce. Well, the biggest branch in God's kingdom is the humblest person, because their heart is like a hugely thick branch that allows more of the sap to flow into it. They have less of self, and more of a passion for the firstness of God in their life – and the power of God moves mightily through him or her.

3. Humility rejoices

So we could say to John the Baptist, ‘Well that was noble. You saw your true role, and you had the right reaction. That sounds very self-sacrificial of you, to want to decrease so another could increase.

Obviously, this is costing you, John.’ But listen to John’s words: *“but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.”* Rejoicing.

John was not miserable – his humility was filled with rejoicing. The humble life is not one where you look at your shoes, and never make eye contact, it is one of rejoicing. It is the satisfied life of one enjoying their true role as a reflector of God’s glory. It is one moving with the momentum of God – and nothing could be more exciting or thrilling. John was thrilled to see the Messiah entering centre stage. He was only too happy to leave the stage for the One it was meant for.

See, if your design instructions are to reflect God’s glory, then be assured nothing less than that will ever bring you true fulfilment. What robs us of joy is when we live life in any other way than the way our Designer meant us to. You could use a lawnmower to clean your carpet. It will probably do quite an effective job. However, it will also do a lot of damage in the process, because you are violating its design instructions.

Life was never meant to be lived apart from Jesus as the centre. It’s only as we get back there do we have real life. As Jesus said: *“These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly”* (John 15:11).

Why is there joy in humility?

Because the mirror that reflects most clearly shines brightest. The one most small in man’s eyes, is in all probability throbbing with the life of God. And the one washing feet is never so aware of the heart of Jesus. Because no one is more like Jesus than the one who walks the Calvary Road. The branch so humble as to be empty of self is pulsing with the life of God.

“I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Galatians 2:20

The paradox is solved – John the Baptist was the greatest because he was the humblest – and yet the one even humbler than Him will be greater than him. Because the greatness is not in us: it is in our God. And the so the greatest one is the emptiest – the one through whom God is most mightily expressed. Someone might say, “I’m afraid I’ll lose out if I’m humble.” But God reassures us many times, doesn’t He?

“He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.”

John 12:35

“Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift thee up.”

James 4:10

What goes down in God’s kingdom must come up, because one passionate about seeing Christ lifted up will be used to just that: God will lift up Christ in him. John the Baptist was the greatest because he was the humblest. He understood his role, he reacted correctly, and he rejoiced in it.