

Habits of Holiness: Part 1

When you want to teach someone something, a simple rule to follow is to use the familiar to explain the unfamiliar. If I want to explain online banking to a someone living in a remote jungle, I'd have to use concepts and ideas they already understand to explain something they do not yet understand. Any good teacher makes use of the familiar to teach the unfamiliar.

Jesus was an amazing example of this. When explaining the deepest spiritual truths, he used things such as sheep and shepherding, grapes, farming, sowing and reaping, weddings, feasts, servants and masters, fishing, and other such things to teach. These were what his audience were familiar with. We still understand them today, and sometimes, with a bit of historical study, we understand even more.

Well, when God has wanted to sum up the Christian life, he has made use of one illustration that is common to all men of all times. He has chosen to use this illustration over 200 times in the Old Testament and over 40 times in the New to refer to the Christian life in general. What is this teaching tool, this illustration that God so favours? It is the illustration of walking.

Walking. Perhaps there is no other illustration as frequently used to describe your relationship with God than that of walking. As early as Genesis 5 we find the remarkable testimony of Enoch. Twice the Bible simply tells us Enoch walked with God. He was one of two people who cheated death, because **Genesis 5:24** tells us, *"And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him."* God translated or caught Enoch up straight to heaven without him dying – so close was his earthly walk with God.

We next find Noah said to be walking with God. Throughout the Old Testament, God commands His people to walk before Him, to walk in His Ways, to walk after His law, to walk with Him. The New Testament simply takes up the theme, and characteristically explains the general concepts in more precise detail.

Why did God major on this illustration of walking? Well, God being the greatest teacher of all, has chosen to use a simple illustration that all can understand, to sum up the simplicity of life lived as a child of God. We can all identify with and grasp the general, familiar concept of walking, and then apply it to the specific, and unfamiliar world of relating to God.

What is the most fundamental thing about walking? Walking is the continual repetition of similar steps. One step does not constitute walking. Taking one step in one direction once a day is not walking. Walking is when you repeat the movement of taking steps continually, so that you begin to move in a certain direction.

The Christian life is made up of repeating a number of things throughout our life. We do not repeat these things robotically or ritualistically. We learn to repeat them depending on God, until they become entrenched in our lives – they become the habits of holiness. Someone said, 'Sow a thought, reap an act. Sow an act, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character.' Your

character, at this very moment, is really the sum total of all the habits of your life, good and bad.

Your life walk is the sum of the things you repeat every day – whether it be your thought life, your speech, your ambitions, attitudes, prayer life, priorities, behaviour at work, home, school, your relationships every day. The way you respond every moment – each step – adds up to your walk – your character. God is primarily interested in our characters – our conformity as a whole to the image of Christ. But character is the sum total of your life's habits.

This is why God uses walking as an illustration. You could think of walking as the habit of taking individual steps repeatedly. The Christian life, walking with God, is the repetition of similar acts of obedience toward God, which, when continually repeated, become a walk with God.

Many Christians flounder and never grow, because they do not make habits out of obeying God. Their obedience is sporadic, staggered, infrequent, and interrupted by disobedience, selfish living and worldliness. Such a Christian is like a toddler learning to walk, one, two, three steps, and then a fall. The motor coordination and balance is not yet there, they've not yet memorised how to take those physical steps properly and repeatedly, so that a smooth, purposeful walk takes place.

Such Christians may be taking steps here and there, but they know in their hearts that they are not truly walking with God. They have not, and are not, repeating certain things in their lives till they become habits of holiness. Fortunately, as we depend on God's grace, we have all the resources necessary to make habits out of obedience, and break habits of disobedience. We have all the power of the resurrection to empower a life lived unto God – a life made up of similar steps, that make up a smooth, purposeful and adult Christian life.

Yes, even adults trip and fall, but it is the exception, not the rule. Sadly, many churches are made up of almost entirely spiritual infants. In a world which encourages self-indulgent living, it seems fewer and fewer Christians are marked by the maturity of walking with God.

Some researchers tell us you can form an entirely new habit in just 14 to 21 days. Indeed, if Christians would understand that God is not impressed with one step here, and another one there, but with the sum total of the life – with the walk – we would understand the necessity of forming habits of holiness. We'd see that what really counts is not always what we do, but who we are, which is made up of the sum total of what we do consistently.

What it all amounts to is a desire to develop consistent habits of holiness in our lives that are the individual steps, which, when continually repeated, make up our walk with God.

So, what does the Bible have to say about the kind of walk we are to have? Does it tell us anything about the steps we should take repetitively? It does – and with great precision and with great clarity. Let's begin to look at the steps, which, when repeated, make up a walk with God.

The first one is the continual step of humility. We find this in **Ephesians 4:1-2**. Here, Paul is moving from a description of God's riches and the position of the believer, and now begins to apply it. His first words are about a walk. Listen to verse 1 and 2:

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.

Ephesians 4:1-2

Paul says the first kind of walk we are to have is a worthy walk. This walk – worthy of our calling in Christ – he describes in verse 2 as “*with all humility and meekness.*” The Bible’s paradoxical thinking is clear – the most honourable walk, the worthiest walk, the most important step of all, is humility. God wants His children to know that foundational to walking with Him is humility. The principle is often repeated:

- **Matthew 18:4:** “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”
- **Luke 9:48:** “For he that is least among you all, the same shall be great.”
- **Matthew 20:26:** “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 23:11-12:** “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.”

God is clear that the humblest one is the greatest. Why? Not because of anything special in that person. It has to do with the greatness of God. Humility is getting myself into a place to allow God to all in all. The one most humble is the one allowing God most prominence, and therefore because God is the greatest, such a person is the greatest. The mirror that shines clearest, shines brightest. The human reflecting God most clearly, is the most exalted.

This is why the practice of humility is foundational. It’s where it all begins. Even the Old Testament makes this clear: “*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*” (**Micah 6:8**). The fear of the Lord is simply put – humility. It is the response of the human who understands the truth about who they are, and who God is.

The fear of the Lord is a human responding to the truth about all of God’s character. The combined reaction of dependence, awe, submission, quietness of spirit, lowness is the fear of the Lord, and it is a concise description of humility too. Humility and the fear of the Lord are paired up together in **Psalms 22**.

Since the fear of the Lord is simply responding to the character of God, humility is just the correct reaction to apprehending the glory of God. For this reason, God is clear about the only thing worth boasting about in:

Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Humility is where we embrace the fact that we orbit God – God does not orbit us. We realise and believe that He is the point of the universe, and we were created for His glory and pleasure, not vice versa. It is once we are freed from the lie of pride that thinks God serves us, God needs us, and our pleasure and glory is the point of the universe, that we are humble.

Humility lines itself up with the fact – life is about the glory of God. My greatest need and desire must therefore be to understand all that God is, in the person of Jesus Christ, and reflect that as a born-again believer. Humility is where you state your need of God and your desire for God. Because the Christian life is 100% God's power, the only way to make progress is when you are in the state that relies on God's power – that is, humility.

Andrew Murray put it this way: "Humility is not so much a grace or virtue along with the others; it is the root of all, because it alone assumes the right attitude before God and allows Him as God to do all." If the Christian life is all about God, then the place to begin is the attitude that allows God to be all. That's what humility is. It is the heart that admits God's glory is its greatest need.

Such a heart wants God more than anything else. It correctly understands its position as a creature, as a sinner, and as a saint, and then reacts by desiring a dependant relationship with God more than anything else. It is the attitude of John the Baptist who said, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (**John 3:30**). It is the very attitude of our Lord Jesus, who replied to the temptation to break His fast with the creation of bread by saying that He lived upon every word of God.

God was His greatest need. If the grace of God is the power to live the Christian life, and the condition for grace is humility, then humility is where we begin. **James 4:6** says, "*But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.*" Humility is nothing more than embracing reality, and acting upon it. The one who lives their life as if they do not need God is living in a way that is not in touch with reality. They do need God, whether or not they realise it.

That's why humility and faith are inseparable. Faith is believing the truth, and acting on it. **Hebrews 11:6** gives us the twin forces in faith – belief in the reality of God, and belief in the reward of God. "*But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.*"

The one who wants to take any steps towards walking with God must, by faith, believe that God is who He says He is, and then believe that pursuing Him as the most important thing in their

life is the logical response. It believes God is, and God is the deepest desire of their heart. From there, it acts.

Faith or humility is the lifeblood that a walk with God exists on. You cannot do any of the other steps unless you are fully persuaded that God is who He says He is, and that you therefore need and desire Him more than anything else. For this reason Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:7**, *"For we walk by faith, not by sight."*

Humility is the root movement of the Christian walk, since it obeys the first commandment – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. It obeys the whole duty of man – to fear God. It obeys the truth that life is about glorifying God.

How do I make a continual habit of humility?

1. Commit to private, fervent and constant prayer

Prayer is a statement of humility, if done correctly. Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector shows that it can be done incorrectly. True prayer is the statement of a heart that says, 'I need God, I want God.' A prayerless person is a proud person. The one who lives and acts without petitioning God lives that way because they believe they do not have to. They never ask, because they never think they needs.

We need to make a habit of private, fervent prayer. Some people try to wiggle their way out of this by saying – I pray all the time! Well, that's fine, but the example of Jesus was one who rose a great while before daybreak to pray. He sometimes prayed all night. **Hebrews 5:7** tells us His prayer life was more than a mumbled thought here and there, we are told He *"offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears."* Daniel prayed three times a day.

Prayer is where you will often have your deepest meditation on the person of God – and it is the person of God that humbles you. Prayer is where you wrestle yourself into obedience to God. Prayer is where you experience sublime quietness of spirit. Prayer is all the aspects of the fear of the Lord or humility in one – dependence, submission, quietness, lowness, praise and adoration.

Nothing less than a right view of God will give you the right view of yourself, and consequently, a right response to God. So have you made the habit of daily, private, fervent prayer? It is quite simply the expression of how much you want God, and how much you believe you need Him. It is the very expression of your humility.

How many other habits do you repeat every morning without even thinking? Can we afford not to make prayer one of these habits? See, prayer is not a gift you give to God, like a relative you reluctantly visit to give them some conversation because you know they live alone and are lonely. If that is your attitude, you dishonour God by acting like He needs your prayers. In truth, we need Him – this is the essence of humility!

We need to be in prayer to remind ourselves of how weak, sinful and powerless we are to go through life apart from His grace. And having made a habit of secret prayer, we ought also to practice continual prayer. **1 Thessalonians 5:17** tells us to *“Pray without ceasing.”* That is, make silent prayer and conversation with God a natural thing throughout your day. Train yourself to keep thanking, or praising, or asking, or just talking with God while driving, walking, or sitting when unoccupied with some other pressing task.

See, some people seemingly do not walk with God – they visit with God. They pay Him a courtesy call once a day, and never so much as speak to Him again for another 24 hours. This is not walking. A step needs to be continually repeated to be a walk. The step of humility must be repeated over and over by secret prayer each day, and continual prayer throughout the day.

2. Seek to serve of others

Jesus certainly epitomised this when washing His disciples' feet. A fool-proof way to break the tide of self-serving pride in our hearts is to swim in the complete opposite direction – by serving others. Paul taught this in **Philippians 2:3-4**: *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”*

If you want true humility, regard others as better than yourself and look for ways to serve other people. A servant's heart seeks no recognition, applause, thanks, attention. A servant delights in tasks, not titles, in the work, not the reward, in honest labour, not in honour. Like John says about love – someone claiming to love God, whom he has not seen, but hating his brother, whom he has seen, lives in a theoretical, self-created world. He truly does not love God; he is deceiving himself.

And so the one claiming to be humble before God, but proud before others, is deceiving himself as well. The acid test of your humility is how it manifests itself in front of others. Can you serve them in humility? Here are some acid tests: Can you apologise? Can you admit your faults and mistakes? Can you seek reconciliation? Can you seek forgiveness? Can you receive correction and be thankful for it?

There's more: Can you receive a rebuke without anger? Can you gently give rebuke and correction? Can you rejoice when others are praised? Can you leave your own achievements unsung? Can you resist to turn the conversation to yourself? Can you listen without interrupting? Can you admire another without envy? Can you enjoy another's exaltation?

See, serving others will mean all of the above. It is the decapitating blow to the pride that wants itself honoured above all, that regards itself as the centre of the universe, with all others, including God, orbiting around self.

3. Allow everything in life to be a potential tool to humble you

Andrew Murray suggests welcoming insults, hurts, being overlooked, being neglected, having others preferred over you, as ways of growing humility in our hearts. And this in fact, is biblical. Paul discovered this with his physical ailment – his thorn in the flesh. Hear His profound words in 2 Corinthians:

For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

2 Corinthians 12:8-10

Paul, like all of us, shrank back from something that was humbling him. But then, God taught Him that the humbler he was, the more perfectly he would experience God. Once he had that perspective, he started to not only accept, but to glory in his physical and mental weakness, in insults, in unmet needs, in persecutions and in everyday trouble – why? Because with his renewed mind, they had now become opportunities for Him to learn humility in an even deeper way.

With this mindset, barbaric drivers on the road, unfair bosses, cruel colleagues, disloyal friends, gossiping family, physical weaknesses, slander, mistreatment, struggles, pains and problems become glaring opportunities to allow God to be your all in all. Suddenly, everything in life becomes another chance to decrease more, that He might increase. F.B. Meyer put it beautifully:

"I used to think that God's gifts were on shelves one above the other; and that the taller we grew in Christian character, the easier we could reach them. I now find that God's gifts are on shelves one beneath the other; and that it is not a question of growing taller but of stooping lower; and that we have to go down, always down, to get His best gifts."

So the foundational step is this worthy walk of humility. It's the same as walking by faith – embracing the truth about God and yourself, and acting upon it. Practical habits to form to grow and solidify humility are prayer – private and continual – serving others, and seeing all of life as an opportunity to allow God to be all in all. Practising these as daily, continual steps makes the stride of humility a continual habit.

There are several more habits of holiness we need to look at that make up this walk. We must however begin to get the habit of humility as part of our stride, or all else will be out of balance. In Part 2 of this series, we will look at the habit of walking in the Spirit.