

HUMILITY:
TRUE GREATNESS

C. J. MAHANEY

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To my son, Chad.

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FOREWORD

HUMILITY IS A FUNNY THING.

On the one hand, it's an extremely desirable trait. Most of us, as Christians, would say we want to be humble, right? Or at least we want to be *thought of* as humble. At the same time, few of us have given attention to what being humble actually means. Even fewer have considered what it takes to grow in humility.

In place of true humility we learn certain words or phrases that we believe make us sound humble: “Oh, really, it was nothing” or “Anyone could have done it.” We cast our eyes down and shrug our shoulders or maybe even blush. Of course, we don't really mean it—inside we're congratulating ourselves for how humble we look and feel. We want that reputation but don't know how to get to the reality. Like children playing dress-up in their

parents' clothes, we're only *acting* humble; none of it really fits us.

I'm glad you've been drawn to this book. I believe it can help you make humility more than just a performance. In these pages you'll learn how to make humility the everyday attire of your life.

The author, C. J. Mahaney, is a dear friend of mine, and I've spent a great deal of time with him. We've worked together, traveled together, even lived together. (I rented a room in the Mahaney basement for a year while I was single.) I tell you this to say that I can verify the authenticity of what C. J. writes. He has fought the battles of pride that we all face. He's a man who by God's grace has cultivated and pursued the brand of humility that matters most—the kind that defines a lifetime of walking with God.

For me, the best example of this kind of humility is the fact that, after twenty-seven years of serving as senior pastor of Covenant Life Church, he chose to pass this role on to me. I'm only thirty, while C. J. is fifty-one and, in my opinion, in the prime of his life and ministry. And yet he trained and mentored me, then joyfully allowed me to step into his place. Most young pastors have to start their own church to get the chance to lead so soon, since few older men are willing to give up or share a position of leadership. C. J. was not only willing to make this transition but

planned it for years so that I'd be positioned for success.

Though I've just begun my ministry at Covenant Life, C. J.'s example has inspired me to look ahead to when I can make the same handoff to the next leader of our church. Who knows? That ten-year-old boy running down the church hallway might one day be sitting behind my desk. And when that day comes, I hope I'll have the same humility of heart that C. J. has shown me.

I plan to keep learning from C. J., and I know you'll learn from him as you read this book. What I love about *Humility: True Greatness* is that it takes our focus away from the human audience we're so often preoccupied with and reminds us of the one Observer, our only Sovereign and Savior, whose attention can be captured by a heart and life that displays genuine humility. I pray that, as you read, your desire for true greatness in God's eyes will increase and overflow in a life of true humility.

Joshua Harris



INTRODUCTION

WRITING ABOUT HUMILITY is a humbling experience. Who wants to volunteer to write on *this* subject? Not me. There've been countless times while completing this book when I've been inspired to think, *You idiot! Why did you agree to do this?* And I could entertain you for hours relating the comments and facial expressions of those who discovered I was authoring a work with this title.

I understand their reaction. If I met someone presuming to have something to say about humility, automatically I'd think him unqualified to speak on the subject.

So let me make this clear at the outset: I'm a proud man pursuing humility by the grace of God. I don't write as an authority on humility; I write as a fellow pilgrim walking with you on the path set for us by our humble Savior. I can only address you with confidence in the great

and gracious God who has promised to give grace to the humble (see James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). That promise forms the heart of this book. And that promise is for every one of us who turns from his or her sins and trusts in the Savior.

The structure of this book is simple and straightforward.

In the first part we'll learn that, no matter our age or vocation, humility is our greatest friend and pride our greatest enemy.

In part two we'll discover that genuine humility requires a radical redefinition of success. We'll learn from Jesus Christ as He teaches His disciples the nature of true greatness, and why this greatness is attainable only through His death on the cross for sinners like you and me.

Finally, in part three we'll get very practical. We'll examine how to cultivate humility and weaken pride each and every day.

I hope you'll take this journey with me. I can certainly think of many who would make better guides. But I *have* experienced the *promise* of humility. His promise is real. And it's for you.

P A R T I



OUR GREATEST FRIEND,
OUR GREATEST ENEMY

*The Battle of Humility
Versus Pride*

THE PROMISE OF HUMILITY

IN A CULTURE that so often rewards the proud—a world quick to admire and applaud the prideful, a world eager to bestow the label “great” on these same individuals—humility occasionally attracts some surprising attention.

Take, for example, the bestselling book *Good to Great*. Since 2001, this leadership manual from Jim Collins has become one of the most popular and influential in the business world. I rarely meet a leader who hasn't read it. The book is driven by this question: Can a good company become a great company, and if so, how? To find the answer, Collins and a team of researchers spent five years studying eleven corporations that had made the leap from being merely *good* companies to being *great* ones.

I had the chance to hear Jim Collins speak on this

topic to an audience of pastors and business leaders. In his presentation, Collins identified two specific character qualities shared by the CEOs of these good-to-great companies.

The first was no surprise: These men and women possessed incredible professional will—they were driven, willing to endure anything to make their company a success.

But the second trait these leaders had in common wasn't something the researchers expected to find: These driven leaders were self-effacing and modest. They consistently pointed to the contribution of others and didn't like drawing attention to themselves. "The good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes," Collins writes. "They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or become unreachable icons. They were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results."

When Collins interviewed people who worked for these leaders, he says they "continually used words like *quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, understated, did not believe his own clippings*; and so forth" to describe them.¹

IN GOD'S GAZE

Here, it appears, is open acknowledgment of humility's value—recognition that humility *works*, that it goes far in

building respect for those who have it and in inspiring trust and confidence from people around them.

Yes, amazingly, humility sometimes attracts the world's notice.

But here's something even more astonishing: Humility gets *God's* attention. In Isaiah 66:2 we read these words from the Lord:

This is the one *to whom I will look*:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word.

This profound passage points us to an altogether different motivation and purpose for humility than we will ever find in the pages of a secular business manual. Here we find motivation and purpose rooted in this amazing fact: *Humility draws the gaze of our Sovereign God.*

If we understand the background of this passage, we find even richer meaning. Here God is addressing the Israelites, a people with a unique identity. Chosen by God from among all the nations on earth, they possessed both the temple and the Torah—the Law of God. But they didn't tremble at His word. In a sense they had everything going for them except what was most important. They lacked humility before God.

So in this passage, God in His mercy is drawing the

Israelites' attention away from their prideful assumption of privilege as His chosen people and away from their preoccupation with the trappings of religion. These things don't attract His active and gracious gaze. But humility does.

GOD HELPS THOSE...

The eyes of God are a theme running throughout Scripture. Take, for example, the familiar words of 2 Chronicles 16:9, "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him." Obviously God doesn't have physical eyes; God is spirit (John 4:24). He doesn't need physical eyes, because He's also omniscient. Nothing escapes His notice. He's aware of all things.

But though He's aware of everything, He's also searching for something in particular, something that acts like a magnet to capture His attention and invite His active involvement. God is decisively drawn to humility. The person who is humble is the one who draws God's attention, and in this sense, drawing His attention means also attracting His grace—His unmerited kindness. Think about that: There's something you can do to attract more of God's gracious, underserved, supernatural strength and assistance!

What a promise! Listen to this familiar passage again

for the very first time: “God...gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). Contrary to popular and false belief, it’s not “those who help themselves” whom God helps; it’s those who *humble* themselves.

This is the promise of humility. God is personally and providentially supportive of the humble. And the grace He extends to the humble is indescribably rich. As Jonathan Edwards wrote, “The pleasures of humility are really the most refined, inward, and exquisite delights in the world.”² This book’s purpose is to help position you to receive and experience those exquisite pleasures.

WHAT IS HUMILITY?

For me, Jim Collins’s book was an encouraging reminder that even in a world that celebrates the proud, humility is still valued. But books like *Good to Great* have severe limitations; they can take us only so far in understanding humility because they’re not rooted in a biblical worldview. Our definition of humility must be biblical and not simply pragmatic, and in order to be biblical it must begin with God. As John Calvin wrote, “It is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.”³

That’s where the following definition can help us:

Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness.

That's the twin reality that all genuine humility is rooted in: God's holiness and our sinfulness. Without an honest awareness of both these realities (and we'll reflect on both throughout this book), all self-evaluation will be skewed and we'll fail to either understand or practice true humility. We'll miss out on experiencing the promise and the pleasures that humility offers.

That's why I want to direct you to God's help for evaluating your life honestly, to understand whether you're growing in the humility that draws His gaze and attracts more of His grace.

DO YOU HAVE IT?

A few years ago our church—Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland—celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. As we gathered on this occasion to rejoice together, Gary Ricucci, who's part of our pastoral team and one of the church's founding pastors, stood before us to present an overview of our history. He observed that though much had changed over the previous twenty-five years—such as the physical appearance of certain pastors like myself—the particular values that were present at our church's inception had remained unchanged.

Listening intently to Gary that morning was a church member and small-group leader named Jim. Before attending Covenant Life, he'd been a part of a congregation where, regretfully, a serious church split had taken place. As he listened to Gary describe our church's enduring values, Jim's mind was busy comparing these with the values evident in his former church. "Why was my experience so different?" Jim wondered.

He heard Gary affirm that, right from the beginning, Covenant Life Church had a love for God's Word.

And Jim said to himself, *Yes, we had that.*

Gary continued, "We were in love with Jesus Christ and grateful for His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross."

Yes, Jim thought, *we had that, too.*

"We loved grace, and we loved worship."

Yep, had that.

"We believed in the importance of relationships," Gary added.

Once again Jim inwardly responded, *Okay, we had that.*

Then Gary said, "And there was a strong emphasis on humility, especially among the leaders."

And Jim thought, *Nope. That we did not have.*

Let's ask ourselves: When it comes to the values we live by, what will others say about us one day? Will they testify that *humility* characterized our lives?

So many human ventures, so many grand designs of mankind, have been undermined because humility was lacking on the part of those involved. In the following chapter we'll take a look at just how dangerous pride is, but our motivation for rooting out pride must go beyond a knowledge of its pitfalls and perils. Our pursuit should be driven by the amazing promise that humility holds out to us: *God gives grace to the humble!*

What are you building with your life? A marriage? A family? A business? A church? A career? In all your ventures, are you aware of your need for God's grace to give your efforts lasting value? Do you long for God's providential help and blessing? Then let's allow the promise of humility to shape our life and choices, so our children and others will one day look back and say of us, *They had that. They had humility. They had what mattered.*

Notes

1. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 27.
2. From the March 2, 1723, entry in Jonathan Edwards's diary, *Memoir of Jonathan Edwards*, http://www.tracts.ukgo.com/memoir_jonathan_edwards.pdf (accessed August 3, 2005).
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 38.