

Discussion, Activity, and Study Guide for *Humility: The Quiet Virtue* (Worthington)

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Why I'm Creating This Discussion, Activity, and Study Guide

This little book blends 61 inspirational quotes (on even numbered pages) with a brief essay. The essay consists of a 3-page Introduction and six chapters. *Humility: The Quiet Virtue* was written and published in 2007. It came out before psychological scientists began to study humility seriously. In 2000, June Price Tangney had written an article in which she wondered whether humility could ever really be studied by psychologists. They often rely on people's self-report for understanding the way people experience life. You can see why this might be a concern. Ask yourself how you'd respond if someone said, "I'm the humblest person in the world. Definitely 10 on a scale from 0 to 10." Problem is, the person might be right! Chances are, though, the person is misunderstanding his or her level of humility. That paradox seemed to paralyze psychological scientists from studying humility from 2000 to about 2009. This book was written with two aims. First, I wanted to inspire people to be humbler. Second, I wanted to dislodge the study of humility from its analysis paralysis. I did the second by observing one thing. If we say we're humble, others have room to doubt us. But what if all of the others who knew us described us as humble. That would be a lot solid ground for deciding we actually were humble. Of course, we might merely be masters of deception. But the chances are we could not really fool all of the people who knew us well.

The organizing principle of this little book is my description of my heroes of humility. Up front and personal is my mother-in-law, Rena Canipe (before her death at age 93 in 2011). But, in keeping with the idea of other people perceiving our humility, I also describe inspiring (for me) movies and heroic historical figures. I believe that reading about inspiring heroes of humility can help us become humbler. It can give us an ideal to live up to. It can inform us how these people met challenges similar to those that we might also meet. It might activate our motivation to be humble by seeing the cause that inspired the model and perhaps encouraging us to make it our own.

I'm a committed Christian. This book is written for all people, not just Christians. In fact, since 2007, I have participated as author of about 100 scientific studies on humility. I now have a much better idea of what differentiates Christian humility from the secular humility. In a nutshell, there are two things. First, our motivation is to better our relationship with and trust in God the Father by having the same stance as Jesus (Phil 2) as we are led by the Holy Spirit. Our motive is inner transformation. Second, our orientation is to elevate others. By lifting others—even when we lay down our own life to do so—we get our own focus off of ourselves.

This "Discussion, Activity, and Study Guide for *Humility: The Quiet Virtue*" can help you, your romantic partner, your children, or others in a group with you become a humbler Christian. My suggestion is read each short chapter, which is just a few pages. Then, read my summary of the chapter. Finally, consider the questions that follow either individually or as a guide for discussion.

Introduction and Chapter 1 (Paradoxes and Potentials of Humility)

In the Introduction, I suggest that (1) you search your life and identify one or more heroes of humility whom you know and (2) you might learn from whom you picked what makes up humility and (3) you are probably already humble, but you probably want to be humbler. In Chapter 1, I describe two extended examples of humility. First, Rena Canipe, my mother-in-law, whom I will follow throughout the book, is a champion of humility. She does so as a committed servant of others springing from her deep faith in Jesus. Second, From the book, *Keys to the Kingdom* (A. J. Cronin), I pick a second (fictional) exemplar of humility—Father Chisholm. I invite the reader to reflect on these to detect what might be common in both that makes humility be humility.

Thought Questions

Read all of the quotes in this chapter. What is your favorite?

Who are your heroes of humility? Why do you think they are humble? If you have several people you think are humble, as most people will, then what is common across all of them? If you are in a group, what seems common across different heroes identified by group members?

Rena Canipe and Father Chisholm serve others—even self-sacrificially. Yet there are many atheists who also serve others? What is it other than serving others that makes humility become Christian humility?

What if a person devotes his or her life to serving a cause that you do not approve of—suppose that is a militia that is dedicated to overthrowing the government of the nited States? Or suppose that is a person who holds a position radically different from you on abortion, on making reparations to historically disadvantages groups of people, on gun control, on whether it's okay to hold public demonstrations even if they lead to violence. Furthermore, that person supports his or her arguments with Scriptures (even though you might not agree with the interpretations). Is that person humble?

For children: Teach what humility is simply—actually too simply for scientific or theological accuracy. So humility might be described as people who love God and love other people—even when it's hard to love them. Also humble people might be seen as those who don't need to draw attention to themselves.

Chapter 2 (Heroes of Humility)

Brief summary of Chapter 2. I identify several heroes of humility. These include (1) more about Rena Canipe; (2) Arthur Reppert (a long-time member of Christ Presbyterian Church); (3) Kathy Ingram (a faculty member with me at VCU); (4) Russell Stannard (a colleague from Amsterdam who does BBC science programs for children); (5) David Myers (a psychologist and philanthropist); (6) Artaban from *The Fourth Wiseman*; and (7) my own struggles with humility after the murder of my mother.

Thought Questions

Read all of the quotes in this chapter. What is your favorite?

It's easy to be humble when you have everything going for you. But when your ego gets placed under stress, perhaps it's not as easy. Times that our ego is easily stressed include a person disagrees with you publicly, a person challenges your competence or your belief system, your partner or your child disagrees with you and insists on his or her way, you enjoy a huge success and people pay a lot of

attention to you, saying wonderful things about you and tempting you toward thinking highly of yourself.

If you are behaving humbly but your ego is not under strain, are you really being humble? Does it REQUIRE a challenge to prove your humility?

For children: See if they can think of Biblical heroes who are humble. This might be David as he fights Goliath. Another example might be the Good Shepherd who looks after his sheep and goes off looking for the 1 leaving the 99 penned up. Samuel's listening to God's voice might be another example. Ruth was humble in going with Naomi back to Israel. A negative example might also help. For example, look at Gideon, who was afraid and hiding when an angel came to him. Just being afraid and unwilling to be seen as a leader is not humility; it's just fear. If they identify a story, they can draw or paint with water colors a picture on it. If they have a "devotions" book, you can read the story or they can if they're old enough to read.

Chapter 3 (What Do These Heroes Have in Common?)

In this chapter, we see some themes. First, most of these "heroes" are everyday people. Second, they are dedicated to meeting others' needs. Third, they are imperfect. Even though they are heroes, they are not perfect, which gives each of us hope. Fourth, humility can be an act, a season, or a lifetime characteristic. Part of humility is rooted in seeing that there are things bigger than I. God is God, and we aren't. This is a clear message in the Bible, and it is so much built into the human condition that other religions and philosophies recognize it, and they have worked it into their religion or philosophy. Wouldn't it be strange if God created us with a "God-shaped vacuum" and no other philosophy or religion recognized that? Fifth, humility frees us from having to focus on ourselves. We do see all of life, including life eternal with Jesus, as bigger than ourselves. Sixth, humility (especially Christian humility) involves serving others. Seventh, others' opinions can reveal whether we are humble. What would those who know you best say about your humility?

Thought Questions

Read all of the quotes in this chapter. What is your favorite?

These heroes of humility are everyday, imperfect people who see God as more important than themselves and thus seek to serve others for a lifetime instead of being focused on themselves often, yet they often are able to sustain humility only for a short period or for a season.

Do you agree with this? Or would you add or take away some of these themes?

To the degree that this one sentence description of heroes of humility is correct, might those who know you best consider you as a hero of humility?

For children: Summarized very briefly some of the Bible stories, like David and Goliath and Samuel and Ruth. What is similar in each of the characters. Hopefully, the children will see the person's absolute dependence on God as important.

Chapter 4 (Can We Learn Humility?)

Many people value humility. (Sometimes we might cynically think that others want US to be more humble but might not be willing to be more humble themselves.) But can people learn to be more

humble. As Christians, we might make a knee-jerk judgment that God is the author of humility and builds it within us based on God's desires for us. And there is no denying that God is a driver of our desire and motivation to be more humble. Yet, if it were not ALSO up to us, Paul would not have written Philippians 2 in which he encourages us to have the mindset of Christ, who was oriented to lifting others up. That suggests that we have a role in building our own humility, and also the body of Christ has a role in being the incubation chamber for our development of humility. Historically, programs like The Rule of St. Benedict (ladder to humility) and Bernard of Clairvaux's twelve steps down into pride have been ways the church encourages humility.

In this chapter, we note several things we can do to become more humble. These include focusing on negating the negative: (1) nixing narcissism, (2) eliminating entitlement, (3) puncturing pride, (4) eliminating egoism through empathy with others' needs. But it is not enough just to eliminate the negative. We need to cultivate an accurate sense of self: (1) securing self-confidence and self-esteem so that we have an accurate sense of self and (2) being self-aware (but not too self-aware). We also need to leap from the limelight through practicing modesty. We also can live virtuously pursuing a meaningful life by staying close to Jesus and practicing virtue. It isn't easy to build humility for several reasons. First, we have a natural self-serving bias (perhaps arising from our fallen nature). Second, we are human as thus have the same limits that Jesus had as fully human. There just are things humans cannot do. Third, sometimes life intrudes on our best-laid plans, desires, and motivations. As humans, we are subject to economic stresses, injury, accidents, culture-bound limits, corrupt social systems, low power, and age-related limits (such as when we are young or elderly).

Thought Questions

Read all of the quotes in this chapter. What is your favorite?

To what degree can we learn humility? Is becoming humbler purely up to God's sovereign will? What role, if any, does human striving for humility contribute? If a person is motivated by the Holy Spirit to become humbler, can human effort help? If so, is human effort sufficient to bring about Christian humility?

Humility is a personal characteristic, and therefore is part of common grace. Humility comes from the word, *humus*—which is from the earth, from which we all come and will all return at death. In that way, humility is human. It is like rationality, acting morally, empathizing with others, forgiving, and a host of other virtues—part of common grace. But even if humility is part of common grace, might there be things that set Christian humility apart from humility that is merely human? What are the differences in Christian humility and mere human humility?

Humility can arise from the limitations we face as humans—like economic stresses, injury, accidents, culture-bound limits, corrupt social systems, low power, and age-related limits. Does that mean we should not strive to eliminate as many of those limitations as we can?

For children: If we want to be more humble, one of the most important (probably THE most important) things we can do is ask God to help us be humbler. One way to get across some of these complex and complicated abstract concepts that the adults will wrestle with in this chapter is by concrete examples. So, you might tell a story, which you would shift to be age-appropriate for your child, about Sally and LaShonda who are playing together. One of their friends comes up, and one of the two children (let's say

Sally) criticizes the other. “Perhaps she says, ‘You’re no good at puzzles.’ LaShonda has her ego challenged. Ask the child what LaShonda might want to say back. If LaShonda wanted to be humble, though, she might not immediately fire back a counter-criticism or a defensive response. Instead, she might think to herself whether what Sally said was accurate. LaShonda might think about what made Sally say this criticism. Then ask what LaShonda should do or say in response. (For a further question, you might ask your child what Sally might say if she realizes she has been critical and would rather be humble than critical.)

Chapter 5 (What Does Science Tell Us about Humility?)

At the point this book was written, the answer to this question is frankly “not much.” But now, we have about 500 scientific studies on humility and know a lot more. In the chapter, we looked at what was known about measuring humility (not much, but now about 40 instruments exist to measure humility accurately). We look at narcissism (not really very compatible with humility), shame (which focuses us on ourselves, and thus keeps us away from being other-oriented), and a humble personality. In counseling, nothing existed to help people who wanted to do so to build humility. (Now several programs have been developed. The most tested one is one called PROVE Humility, which is available on www.EvWorthington-forgiveness.com. Check out the DIY Workbooks tab.)

Thought Questions

Read all of the quotes in this chapter. What is your favorite?

At this point, scientific studies have shown clearly that there are spiritual benefits of being humble. Can you think of what spiritual benefits might accrue to humble people? (Scriptures might help.)

Also, there are social benefits that we experience when others perceive us as humble. People like us more, engage in more problem solving and fewer arguments, etc. To what degree do you think social benefits might be helped along by spiritual benefits of humility?

Humble people have better mental health and psychological well-being than those less humble and especially those who are arrogant, narcissistic, egoistic, manipulative for their own benefit. Humble people are less prone to depression, anxiety, and the “dark triad” of narcissism, manipulation, and psychopathology. To what degree might better mental health be due to better social relations? To what degree might better psychological well-being be due to more connection with God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit?

At this point, there has not been much research on the physical effects associated with higher humility. Can you think of reasons that might contribute to better physical health and well-being in humbler people? (For a start, think of chronic stress. How might humility affect people’s experiences of chronic stress?) Again, spirituality might affect physical health and well-being directly or through relationships and through mental health.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that humility is always causal of better effects. Might it be that humbler people find it easier to be more spiritually connected, relationally well-connected, mentally healthy, and physically healthy?

For children: You might tell the story of Paul and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-40). Paul was beaten and thrown in prison. What might we feel and do if we were beaten up and thrown in prison? What

might we want to do if we found out that the jail doors swung open and we could walk out, even if we knew that the jailer might get in bad trouble if we walked out? Then tell what Paul did (warned the jailer that no one had escaped) and what the consequences were (the jailer became a Christian and also his entire family).

Chapter 6 (The Spirit of Humility)

In the beginning of the chapter, we conclude the story about Rena Canipe, my mother-in-law and my hero of humility. I ask, what happens when dementia begins to erode a person's personhood. Does the person disappear and the personality becomes lost in the brain tangles of dementia? I answer "no." We are held as humans by the communities who know us and remember us. Finally, I ask readers to ponder the paradox of trying to become more humble. It's like catching air in our hand. The more we think we have a grasp on being humble, the more we are showing that we don't have that within our own power. The key to pursuing humility is trusting God to build it in us but focusing on serving others. Paul clearly directs us to have the mindset of Christ, who laid down his life for others. So, we are to seek humility, but instead of focusing on it directly, think toward lifting others up.

Thought Questions

Read all of the quotes in this chapter. What is your favorite?

What do you think about my argument about the way people who love us hold together our personal essence even as dementia erodes it within our skin?

Early in this study we considered how God's work in our lives might dovetail with our own effort. In a way, we've come back to that consideration in my section on the paradox of trying to become more humble. Any other thoughts about the roles of God, of others within the body of Christ, of others even outside of the body of Christ, and of our own efforts in becoming more humble?

For children: We can remind our children of how important families are and how important the friends at church are. Might there be books that have this as a theme? Can you think of other Bible stories that have this theme? As a negative example, look at Joseph's story. He told his brothers about his dream. He flaunted his coat-of-many-colors. As a result of his bragging, his brothers harmed him and sold him into Egypt, a far-away country. But over the years, Joseph realized that God would take care of him regardless of all the bad things others did. He also realized the importance of family, so he made a way for his family to come to Egypt and have plenty to eat instead of staying where they were and perhaps starving.

Final thoughts: (1) Having picked your favorite quotes from each chapter, what are your top three quotes from the entire book? (2) Having gone through the entire book, if you had to write three thoughts you'd take away from this, what would they be?