

# Where Have All the Humble Gone?

By Joe Duke

I still laugh when I recall Larry Crabb's description of the worst sermon he ever heard. He said it was "delivered by a middle-aged man who made me think of a strutting peacock when he spoke."<sup>1</sup> I can't get that picture out of my head. It's hilarious and cringey at the same time. Unfortunately, you don't have to look far to discover that the American church is filled with strutting peacocks. And in full disclosure, I may have strutted a time or two during my preaching adolescence.

These days, pastors of large churches face a new insidious pressure: *celebrity*. In her book, *Celebrities for Jesus*, Katelyn Beaty notes that, "Celebrity is a distinctly modern phenomenon fueled by mass media."<sup>2</sup> And she suggests that "...the very nature of celebrity, especially in a digital era, is that it hides its power behind the illusion of intimacy."<sup>3</sup> That's about as sneaky as you can get. "Celebrity is social power without proximity—the chance to influence without knowing or being known by those you are influencing."<sup>4</sup> Can I say, that sounds slightly dangerous?

But you don't have to stand on a church platform or crave the spotlight in a worship center to be infected with the virus of celebrity. Instead, you can barter for a constant stream of infatuated followers. All those nameless, faceless people are crouched on your digital doorstep even as you read this. Attention seekers and those obsessed with image management will always be able to catch the eye of someone. No matter the cost. Whatever it takes. And it's likely we all desire to be noticed or appear better than we really are.

Can we just admit it? Narcissism has found its way into many churches—climbing through a window or walking unnoticed through the front door. And when the pulpit is polluted, the pews are likely contaminated.

Chuck DeGroat, an expert on narcissism, confronts us with the brutal truth when he says, "Ministry leaders and churches today are obsessively preoccupied with their reputation, influence, success, rightness, progressiveness,



relevance, platform, affirmation, and power."<sup>5</sup> And the trend, he says, should give us pause about the future of churches. He writes,

Some church planting assessments I've seen practically invite narcissistic leadership... the narcissism in many young men in particular is baptized as spiritual giftedness in a way that does a great disservice to them and ignores deep wells of shame and fragility lurking within.<sup>6</sup>

We're sailing choppy waters these days. It might be easy for any of us to float with the rising tide of self-obsession. We might even try to make the case that selfishness is just part of the human condition, so why go against the current? Why try to fight it? But surely, we can hold out for a better alternative.

Enter Jesus.

For starters, Jesus' plan is upside down. Backwards. Counter-intuitive. Inefficient. Non-narcissistic.

He entered the world in *obscurity*. A single angel announced His birth. Then a multitude of angels joined in the celebration. But only a few shepherds were there to see it. It's almost like God wanted to keep the whole thing a secret.

We know little about Jesus' formative years. Only that he increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men (Luke 2:52). As a 12-year-old, Jesus is in the

temple, participating in conversations that seem reserved for adults. It's the same temple visit when Jesus' parents left Him behind (yes, they lost Jesus!).

Then, this God of the universe in human form became the sin-bearer for every person (John 3:16). He is the sin-satisfying sacrifice by becoming sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Again, Jesus' plan is upside down. Backwards. Counter-intuitive. Inefficient. Non-narcissistic.

But it's the prequel of the story that gives us one detail we can't afford to miss. Jesus humbled Himself. Hear this clearly; He *humbled* Himself. Jesus chose *humility* when He had every right to embrace prideful self-centeredness. It would be impossible for Jesus to exaggerate His self-importance. He's infinitely important. Yet, He stepped out of heaven onto the path of *humility* instead—rejecting earthly showiness. That's astounding.

The backstory is found in Philippians 2. Paul urges his readers to have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had. That's why the Philippian believers were urged to:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in **humility** count others more significant than yourselves.<sup>7</sup>

We're to be people of humility because that's what Jesus did. We see his humility described in the great *kenosis* (Greek for *emptied*) passage.

<sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he **humbled** himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.<sup>8</sup>

Humility is not weakness. It's not indecisive. It doesn't play the victim card. Humility is strength. It's power. Humility is true greatness. Humility is loving. It's courageous. Humility is foundational to all virtues.

Perhaps Dostoyevsky was on to something when he wrote, "Loving humility is marvelously strong, the strongest of all things, and there is nothing like it."<sup>9</sup>

I like the way Andrew Murray describes humility when he writes,

Humility, the place of entire dependence on God, is, from the very nature of things, the first duty and the highest virtue of man. It is the root of every virtue. And so pride, or the loss of this humility, is the root of every sin and evil.<sup>10</sup>

Humility is just another way of reminding ourselves we need God. Humility is about dependence on God, not selfish independence. Humility provides a daily posture

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that deflates pride's influence and bolsters our pursuit of God. And as Philip Yancey reminds us, "Why value humility in our approach to God? Because it accurately reflects the truth."<sup>11</sup>

Pride competes for credit. Humility has staved off the craving for recognition. Pride operates from a scarcity mindset—a perspective primarily driven by fear. But the humble person freely offers encouragement, knowing that giving to others can never diminish one's own identity found in Jesus.

So, where have all the humble gone? Well, they're out there. Just not always visible. Many are serving God in the ordinary. Many are content with obscurity. Many have embraced the upside-down life of following Jesus. All of them are *genuinely humble* people. But we may have never heard of them because humility advertised is really not humility at all. And truthfully, "In a culture where people clamor for attention and recognition, those secure in Christ have no need of the spotlight."<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

1. Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2002), p. 21.
2. Katelyn Beaty, *Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits Are Hurting the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), loc. 173, Kindle.
3. Ibid, loc. 172, Kindle.
4. Ibid, loc. 1501, Kindle.
5. Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), loc. 129, Kindle.
6. Ibid, loc. 150, Kindle.
7. Philippians 2:3 ESV. (Emphasis mine).
8. Philippians 2:5-8 ESV. (Emphasis mine).
9. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), p. 292.
10. Andrew Murray, *Humility: The Beauty of Holiness* (London: James Nisbet and Company, 1896), p. 12.
11. Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 37.
12. Joe Duke, *Reflections: Words to Inspire, Challenge and Encourage You* (Reisterstown, MD: LifePoint Press, 2023), p. 78.



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