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Chapter One

Learning to Lead Like Jesus with Humility

Don’t let selfishness and prideful agendas take over. Embrace true humility, and lift your heads to extend love to others.

Philippians 2:3 The Voice

Pride makes us artificial, humility makes us real.

Thomas Merton

Jesus Was Humble

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8).

“He humbled himself.” The Son of God chose humility so He could serve other human beings. Instead of taking advantage of His divinity for Himself, He emptied Himself for the sake of us. Wow! Humility. Service. Obedience. Death. Salvation. The humility of Jesus is the standard we aspire to as followers of His. J.O.Y. comes from serving Jesus first, Others second, and Yourself third—all with a humble heart.

What Is Humility?

To be humble is to have a healthy view of ourselves, others, and God. C.S. Lewis described humility well:
Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call “humble” nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.²

**A Point to Ponder:** Humble people leave behind the residue of God, not themselves.

### The Problem

Pride and humility cannot coexist. Self-conceit and superiority must be confronted by humility. These two varieties of pride are like prolific vines that choke out all forms of life-giving vegetation. Lewis exposed pride as a major obstacle to knowing God: “As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”³

### The Remedy

Humility is the gateway to grace. “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6 NKJV). Since we are to live the Christian life in the same way we became Christians—by grace through faith—it’s imperative we daily infuse our souls with God’s grace. If we think we are humble, we are not. But we know the humble Jesus lives in us, with us, and through us. Humility happily defers in love, saying, “How can I honor you above myself?” Wise leaders walk in humility, preferring others above themselves, and deferring to other needy souls.

**A Point to Ponder:** Humility is the door to walk through to experience God’s grace.
Life Lessons Learned over Coffee

“Have the humility to learn from those around you,” John Maxwell has said often.

Early in my career I learned about authentic humility from a new friend who was honest and upfront about his thoughts on leadership. Though he didn’t specifically use the word humility that was what his heartfelt words described.

I was a young pastor in my late twenties. Every day I drove in a modest Nissan 210 into downtown Atlanta to work at a large church, wearing a smart suit, and armed with a desire to serve people. On one of my first days on the job, I sheepishly joined the maintenance team for a hot cup of coffee. They would gather informally to socialize and plan their day. I came to admire one of them in particular, Eddie, for his walk with Christ and his excellent work ethic. He gave me some very wise counsel at the outset of my service at the church.

“Boyd,” he said, “most of the ‘shirts’ [a slang term for the ministers on staff] wait until the last minute to request a room, audio visual equipment, and chairs. There’s no problem with one isolated request, but when several leaders forget to give us lead time, then the quality of our service suffers and we feel taken for granted. We are expected to respond to every whim of those who are unprepared. They seem uninterested in me as a person or my success as a co-worker.” Then Eddie made a statement that stuck in my heart. “Boyd, what makes me feel respected and valued is when the ‘shirts’ plan ahead, communicate, and give me proper notice for their room requests so I am able to serve them with energy and excellence.”

Eddie’s remarks remind me of a military slogan: “Prior planning prevents poor performance.”

Wow, what a valuable lesson for a young leader who wanted to serve like Jesus. Here was justifiable frustration from a fellow servant of Christ. He experienced a disconnect between what leaders said about “valuing others above self” and how it played out in the everyday planning of church events.

So, for many mornings over the next six years I arrived early for my cup of coffee and my dose of practical wisdom. I wanted to be a “shirt”
who was constantly learning how to better serve those who served with such unselfishness.

**TAKEAWAY:** Humble leaders show respect by planning ahead and listening to others.

**A Childlike Trust Asks for Wisdom from a Humble Heart**

Let’s examine the early career of the wisest man who ever lived, second only to Jesus: Solomon.

“I am like a little child who doesn’t know his way around. And here I am in the midst of your own chosen people, a nation so great and numerous they cannot be counted! Give me an understanding heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong. For who by himself is able to govern this great people of yours?” The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for wisdom (1 Kings 3:7-10 nlt).

Children are so refreshing in their humble and honest questions about God. Over breakfast recently our six-year-old grandson asked me if we will have pancakes in heaven. “Of course,” I said. But then I thought, *Wait—is that good theology? Is that really true?* But for my trusting little person, the pancake confirmation opened the door for a string of questions related to what else we will experience in heaven. Humility expresses itself in childlike trust—so simple, and not distracted by adult doubts.

Solomon, the son of David, did not always learn from his father’s mistakes, but he did benefit from following his dad’s heart for God. With a combination of poetic expression, keen insight, deep understanding, instructive contrasts, everyday examples, and Holy Spirit inspiration, the book of Proverbs provides a baseline of wisdom for any serious student of Scripture.

In the 1 Kings passage quoted above, Solomon reflected on his
appointment from the Lord. As the reality of his responsibilities began to weigh on his heart, God, in a dream, asked the new king what he wanted. Solomon humbly replied that he needed wisdom to govern well God’s great people, and to know the difference between right and wrong.

Yes! The new leader did not act like he knew what he didn’t know. He did not say, “I’ll fake it until I make it.” Rather, Solomon was real about his lack of experience and knowledge. He knew God’s wisdom would allow him to govern well, and he honored the people by recognizing them as the Lord’s cherished possession.

How refreshing! What if every government leader, church leader, community leader, business leader, military leader, and family leader approached their task with a humble request for wisdom?

**TAKEAWAY:** Humble leaders ask God for wisdom to discern right from wrong.

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**A Humble Follower of Jesus Christ Seeks to Educate the Poor**

Mother Teresa is one of my favorite followers of Christ. I never met her, but I have met someone much like her. God called Ananthi Jebasingh to start the Good Samaritan School in the late 1980s. A brilliant, middle-aged empty nester with a PhD, she surrendered her life to the Lord in service to the poorest of the poor, never receiving a dime of salary. Her ministry began in her garage in Delhi, India. Barefooted children who begged for food, with matted hair and crusty green noses, hopeful and hungry, filed in like army ants. Ananthi fed their bodies with bread donated by a believer in Christ, and then fed their souls with the Bread of Life, Jesus. The children felt love from this woman who cared enough to open her home and her heart to ragged strangers.

**A Point to Ponder:** Humility looks for opportunities to teach and serve society’s marginalized.
Humility Extends a Legacy for Christ

Ananthi was called by her heavenly Father from the sophisticated halls of higher education to the unsophisticated streets of the slums. When I look at her, I see the face of Jesus. Her quiet humility speaks to me about leadership, wisdom, and obedience.

She learned humility from her earthly father in southern India. Her dad would bring home society’s outcasts, the untouchables. Yes, his love for the Lord compelled him to reach out, touch, and love those who otherwise were rejected by their neighbors. The example of her father feeding the homeless, clothing the naked, and giving dignity to the downtrodden lodged deep into her soul. More than anyone I have ever met, she unselfishly honors others above herself.

Now the Good Samaritan School has a main campus and five satellite schools in the slums. Over 1,500 children receive school uniforms, education, nutrition, and minor medical care. Most importantly, they experience love, respect, laughter, security, and salvation in Jesus Christ.

Our family has experienced the joy of having Ananthi as a guest in our home. We hoped our four daughters and our friends might be influenced by her example. Her calling is from heaven, to serve the poor on earth. Ananthi is one of our few living heroes; her humility points us beyond herself and her work to Jesus, to worshipping Him in praise and gratitude.

A Point to Ponder: Humility is built on the example of those who leave a faithful legacy for Christ.

Humility Avoids the Comparison Trap

But wait. Hit the Pause button. Time-out. Isn’t Ananthi an icon? Another Mother Teresa? How can we relate to this level of sacrificial love and Christlike commitment? It’s a subtle trap for us to compare our calling to Ananthi’s. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by her faith and treating her like a super-spiritual saint, we must recognize and embrace our own callings. How is the Lord asking each of us, in our own circumstances, to walk in humility, love, and service to
others—especially those without, who suffer in poverty of body, soul, and emotions?

The spiritually bankrupt need our support, as well as those who have lost jobs, homes, or loved ones. All around us are children, teenagers, and adults whom we can love and lead to the Lord with our actions and our words. Ananthi Jebasingh’s life is a humble reminder for us to remain faithful to the call to love people different from ourselves. Wisdom in leadership humbly honors others above ourselves. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:3-5).

**TAKEAWAY:** Humble leaders celebrate the successes of others and are inspired by them.

**Humble Words Heal; Proud Words Hurt**

“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Proverbs 18:21).

Don’t you hate it when your words come out too quickly and expose your thoughts too soon? Don’t you sometimes wish you could take back your hasty words and have a second chance to not speak so fast? When your tongue gets ahead of your thoughts, the harsh words that come out are from pride, not humility. There is a way to wait before you speak. Let’s explore some ideas around how your words can bring sweetness to the soul and healing to the body.

Some leaders motivate by love and encouragement; others by fear and intimidation. I had two different high school football coaches. My least favorite was the intimidator. I feared him because of his tirades and angry, abusive language. I was motivated for a short time, but was afraid I would not do precisely what he wanted. The coach who helped me the most was the encourager. He expected a high standard of performance, but his style was both instructional and inspirational. With him I knew I had room for failure, but my goal was growth.
I saw the first coach as an angry man who expected perfection; he was never totally pleased with me. The second I saw as supportive; he brought out the best in me and expected the best from me. We do our best under leaders who make us feel valued and who challenge us to reach our capacity.

Words matter, and the words of a leader are dissected by followers like a chloroformed frog in a high school biology lab. Wise leaders prayerfully measure their words before speaking.

**A Point to Ponder:** Humility offers encouragement that gives life; pride offers discouragement that gives death.

Our words can get us into trouble or they can dissolve it. Just as a puff of breath can extinguish a candle flame, so a humble word of apology can extinguish the fire of an angry heart. “Please forgive me; I was emotionally spent and did not mean to hurt you with my disrespectful tone.” Language brings life when it comes from one immersed in Christ, or death when it comes from one who is indifferent to the Lord. Words matter. When our words come from hearts of worship to God, we are able to bring proper sacrifices of speech to Him.

The power of the tongue must be tamed under the superior power of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise it becomes a weapon of mass destruction. Like radioactive fallout, sinister speech poisons the atmosphere so that what’s inhaled into the heart shuts down the spirit. What does it mean to bless others through measured conversations? Water from a hidden irrigation hose snaking through a luscious garden can cause the plants to grow and thrive. So also the language of love gives life by delivering grace to the roots of a thirsty soul.

**A Point to Ponder:** Humility allows the Holy Spirit to use words for goodness and glory.

“Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (Proverbs 16:24).

If my heart is full of pride, my words will be laced with a verbal
poison of judgment and superiority. If my heart is full of humility, my speech will be seasoned with grace and mercy. If my heart is consumed with fear, I will communicate worry and dread. If my heart is captivated by hope in Christ, I will experience peace and have the courage to speak expectantly of God’s faithfulness. If my heart hurts from neglect, I will shamelessly shame another. But if my heart is comforted by the Lord’s love, I will have the capacity to give words of comfort. The fruit of healthy words is healing.

“A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45).

Wise leaders are able to empty self and allow Christ to fill their hearts with forgiveness, love, and kindness. God can fill our mouths with fruitful words of encouragement, correction, and compassion. By God’s grace we can be Jesus followers whose words bring life to the soul and death to sin! Wise leaders humbly measure their words to bring healing, not hurt, to others.

“Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3).

**TAKEAWAY:** Humble leaders use words to build up and not tear down.

**Humility, Brokenness, Patience, and Persistent Prayer**

One of our daughters could not have children. She suffered through years of testing, prodding, probing, and praying. There was anxious anticipation and stress over whether insurance would pay all, pay something, or pay nothing. In the end, the doctor concluded the only hope lay with a special procedure that even then offered only a five percent possibility of pregnancy. Ten days prior to the scheduled procedure our daughter tested again for pregnancy and…it was positive! Amazed and teary-eyed, she administered the home test a second time and remarkably—yes—pregnant! Wife and husband embraced in grateful hope. She called her mom (my wife); her husband called...
his parents; we all wept together in humble thanksgiving to God. An unfulfilled longing had brought us to our knees, in need of our Father’s generous grace—and now, this gift.

Humility keeps us positioned for the Lord’s blessings. Our hope may be deferred, but God is still good. Where man gave a five percent chance, the Lord gave 100 percent of His faithfulness, care, and comfort!

“In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. And she made a vow, saying, ‘LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head’” (1 Samuel 1:10-11).

Many times humility precedes brokenness. This seems to be Hannah’s experience. Unable to have children, she cried out to the Creator—to create within her womb a precious child.

A Point to Ponder: Humility waits on God’s best and resists forcing things to happen.

Barren. Broken. Rejected. Sorrowful. Ashamed. Just a few of the feelings that could have been in Hannah’s hurting heart. Her culture branded her infertility as failure. The inability to have a child was wrongly interpreted by her peers as judgment from God. Brokenhearted but not stewing in self-pity, Hannah humbled herself and called on the name of the Lord to bless her with a son. She vowed with sacred devotion, and pre-dedicated him to the Lord for all the days of his life. Her heavenly Father answered her prayer and blessed her with Samuel, who grew into the godly priest who anointed David, and into whose family lineage Jesus Christ would eventually be born. God blessed Hannah’s humility, bold prayer, and desperate trust in Him.

I can’t imagine the emotional upheaval of being unable to fulfill the God-given desire for motherhood, to be willing but unable to birth a baby. Perhaps this feeling rivals other unfilled, deep longings of the soul: the longing for marriage felt by a single adult, the yearning for a current marriage to thrive and not just survive, the desire for a
work opportunity that seems never to come, or simply the urge to feel known, understood, and loved by another. When our hearts long for someone or something, in our utter brokenness, in our loneliness, our heavenly Father’s mercy meets us. His love makes our souls whole. His grace heals our fractured faith.

How’s your heart? In humility, have you embraced your brokenness as a pathway to answered prayer, to blessing, to an intense intimacy with God?

**TAKEAWAY:** Humble leaders use brokenness as a pathway to greater intimacy with God.

**Humility Is Willing to Adapt for the Good of Everyone**

I can get caught up in my own little world and become oblivious to the needs of my family. Such was the case when we had four teenage daughters at home and I was traveling too much, not realizing the pressure my wife was under. I needed a wake-up call.

In early 2001, I freely traveled around the country leading our national field team for Crown Financial Ministries. Rita, my sweet wife, was at home with our four teenage daughters. One trip was an exhilarating week of serving our leadership teams in California. I had watched Christ bring hope to families who discovered and embraced the Lord’s ownership of everything: their calendars, their bank accounts, their stuff, and their relationships. As I returned home, Rita said, “We need to talk.” Her tone was serious but hopeful, concerned but caring.

“There are reasons why God’s plan is for a dad and mom to parent children together.” As she stated the obvious, I began to feel her pain. She continued, “I am glad you are able to travel the world sharing the gospel and loving leaders, but I need more of you at home to help me parent the girls.” Rita was so right: boys, homework, boys, volleyball, boys, basketball, boys, church, boys, choir, boys, field trips, boys, drama club, boys, dances, and boys. Did I mention boys?

Small children need their mothers’ nurturing, but teenagers can
take advantage of their moms. They require their dad’s loving firmness and patient wisdom to help them manage their growing freedoms.

Sometimes there is no need to pray about the need to do something. I don’t need to pray about whether or not to walk across a busy eight-lane interstate, or whether or not to watch the Cubs win the World Series after a 108-year drought, or whether or not to help my wife do what’s best for our family. I could trust my colleagues to pick up some of my work responsibilities, but I was the only one who could be the girls’ dad. We were able to come up with a simple, easy-to-understand, low-tech plan.

**A Point to Ponder:** Humility listens and offers ways to help.

A red sticker the size of a nickel represented dad being gone one night. After seven stickers were placed on the monthly wall calendar, I would not schedule any additional travel days that month. When a team member would call for me to join them at a leadership retreat, and I explained my calendar already had seven red stickers, no one ever complained. They actually laughed with me at our low-tech solution, and affirmed our accountability system. They then pushed out the request to a later date, or found someone else to stand in the gap, who often did as good a job as I would have—or better.

Rita was delightfully supportive. She could have complained about dad being gone too much. Instead, she gladly explained to the girls, “Guess what? We have dad for 24 days this month. The other seven days, we will pray for him and send him out as a missionary. He can help people grow in their relationship with the Lord, and can encourage them to faithfully serve others.”

What seemed like a career disruption actually allowed our family to grow closer with each other and closer to Christ. By hitting the Pause button and adjusting, we prepared for future leadership opportunities that required a strong and stable family unit, with the necessary emotional energy and spiritual stamina.

When we do what’s best for the family, or for the team, or for the
organization, and then trust God with the outcome, He steps in and grows healthy relationships and strong organizations. Humble leaders look for what’s best for the family or the business, not just what’s best for personal gain. They replace selfish ambition with godly ambition.

**TAKEAWAY:** Humble leaders do what’s best for “us,” not just what’s best for “me.”

### Humility Shares the Credit and Takes the Blame

“By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:3-5).

If things go wrong, my natural tendency is to “give reasons” or even blame another. But if things are successful, I enjoy taking the credit and can forget to celebrate with the team and my family. I can fail to recognize the contributions of everyone in the positive outcome. It’s harder to take the blame and share the credit. I experienced this firsthand with a colleague at work.

I once worked with a colleague who felt the need to receive credit for any team project he participated in. At first it was annoying. Not fair. I and the other three team members, whose contributions were equally as important, felt the injustice. One night over dinner I complained about this. My wife, Rita, said, “Sounds like he has a deep desire for significance that needs to be filled.” I didn’t want to hear words of compassion. I wanted justice, and for him to grow up! But over time I learned she was right. He gained confidence and began to outgrow hoarding the limelight. We all learned to give each other credit for success.

If any one person holds on to credit for success, it corrupts. It corrupts judgment by leading them to think more highly of themselves.
than they should. Wise leaders quickly give away credit to others and to the team as a whole. Credit given recognizes the contribution, skill, and smarts of all the staff.

A humble leader knows that sharing credit goes together with delegating well. Stellar execution and follow-up can’t occur unless associates give tedious attention to details and implementation. Secure leaders can’t wait to give away the credit. Like a wad of cash burning a hole in your pocket, it burns a hole in the ego. Wisdom in leadership understands how to value others and their unique contributions to the organization. As Harry Truman is known to have said, “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.”

Wisdom in leadership also takes the blame for failures, and shows how we should take responsibility for our actions. Wise leaders keep the buck of blame instead of passing it along. They are as quick to take the blame as they are to share the credit. Like a surge protector, they keep the team from suffering an undeserved shock of failure. Mature leaders stand in the gap. They have no claim to fame, but they do take the blame when things go wrong.

A humble leader’s example of blame-taking is infectious to followers. Followers unconsciously find themselves emulating the same blame ownership in their spheres of influence. “I am responsible,” or “It’s my fault” are common statements of blame-takers. When you learn how to effectively take blame for failures and give credit for successes, you exhibit wisdom in leadership. Faithful leaders trust the Lord, who in turn blesses them. The Holy Spirit empowers people through wise leaders who share the credit and take the blame.

***TAKEAWAY:*** Humble leaders give credit for successes to others and to the team.

So what comes to mind about the level of humility in your own leadership? Maybe there are one or two ideas you can apply to grow your humble heart. Before you set your next goal, consider helping another meet their objective. Or when you are at a restaurant, make it about the server’s needs, not about the server meeting your every
need. Pay attention, listen, and you will learn better ways to help those around you. Most of all reflect on the life of Jesus and humble yourself like He humbled Himself: willingly and obediently!

**Summary of Chapter One Takeaways**

1. Humble leaders show respect by planning ahead and listening to others.
2. Humble leaders ask God for wisdom to discern right from wrong.
3. Humble leaders celebrate the successes of others and are inspired by them.
4. Humble leaders use words to build up and not tear down.
5. Humble leaders use brokenness as a pathway to greater intimacy with God.
6. Humble leaders do what’s best for “us,” not just what’s best for “me.”
7. Humble leaders give credit for successes to others and to the team.