



## The Apologetic of Humility

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*"The throne of humility must be the heart. I do hate, of all things, that humility which lives in the face."*

Charles Spurgeon[1]

Good literature helps us by crystallizing our own dilemmas. One of the most complex characters in all of American literature is the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. This Puritan minister earnestly wants to lead his flock into holiness and moral purity, but he carries with him a consuming secret: he has committed adultery. Although Hester Prynne's sin quickly becomes public, Reverend Dimmesdale believes he must conceal his complicity at all costs. He fears that if his moral failing is known, it will disqualify him from any further ministry. He explains this to Hester Prynne, crying out, *"What can a ruined soul like mine effect towards the redemption of other souls? – or a polluted soul towards their purification?"* Dimmesdale has convinced himself that he must offer to the people of New England an example, and this conviction has excluded from his agenda the possibility of offering them a redeemer.

Dimmesdale's question prompts me to ask, *"What are we offering to the world?"* Those of us who desire to engage in the ministry of the Gospel – whether formally or informally – must continually ask ourselves this question. Although we may start with a clear sense of purpose, it is frustrating to recognize one's self gravitating towards selling the messenger (ourselves) rather than the message. Critics of Christianity goad us toward

self-preoccupation when they focus their critique on a particular method or messenger, ignoring the claims of Jesus altogether. This may tempt us to believe that the salvation of souls has less to do with the power of the Gospel and more to do with the skill of the one presenting it. Yet the apostle Paul writes, *"For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants"* (2 Corinthians 4:5).

Paul goes on to draw for the Corinthians an analogy for their role as bearers of the Gospel: they are jars of clay, earthen vessels. Their outward appearance is not spectacular; they are fragile rather than strong, and the treasure is not without but within. He writes, *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us"* (2 Corinthians 4:7). It is not an accident that God has entrusted the Gospel to fragile, fallible couriers. God did this by design so that the messengers would not distract from the message. This is the foundation for the apologetic of humility, by which we divert the expectations and hope of the seeker away from ourselves and onto Christ himself.

Humility is equally vital at our spiritual peaks and in our greatest failures. I see two major obstacles to humility. The first is, quite obviously, the sin of pride. The manifold pleasures of pride are not easily relinquished. We can only release the inferior rewards of self-satisfaction when we embrace the superior delights that are found in God. C.S. Lewis writes, *"The pleasure of pride is like the pleasure of scratching. If there is an itch, one does want to scratch; but it is much nicer to have neither the itch nor the scratch. As long as we have the itch of self-regard we shall want the pleasure of self-approval; but the happiest moments are those when we forget our precious selves and have neither but have everything else (God, our fellow humans, animals, the garden, and the sky) instead."*[2]

The second great threat to humility is the less obvious one of insecurity. Insecurities about one's abilities, one's favor with others, or one's worth in the sight of God are like weeds that would choke out the sprout of humility. Often they work by inducing false humility, which leads us to broadcast our own deficiencies in the hope that someone will contradict us. Insecurity may lead to

a low self-image, but as long as we are focused on ourselves we are far from humility. Our insecurities also drive our attempts to prove ourselves, to show that we are strong and have made ourselves useful to God and those around us. Yet all of this is not humility because it is about us, not God. We make the mistake of fixating on our own earthen vessels, either trying to make them appear more pleasing than they are or obsessing about their flaws. The cure for our insecurity is not to become more secure in ourselves, but more confident in God. Confidence in God is the core of Christian humility.

Yet humility is not just vital to our own spiritual health; it is crucial for our witness to the world. Not only should a defense of the faith be humble, humility should itself be a defense of the faith. I know of no more startlingly countercultural scheme than to be honest about one's own failings. In the political world, to admit a mistake seems to be equated with signing one's own death warrant. In the intellectual world, both professors and students are encouraged to bluff comprehension and competence rather than admit ignorance. In the world of sports, one loss or weak moment can end a career. But the Gospel radically calls us to bring our sin and our weakness into the light. If our message is one of forgiveness, how can we conceal from the world our own need of it? We should certainly not flaunt our sin or champion our failings, but we can be honest about them in reverence and gratitude.

Practicing the apologetic of humility does not mean that we content ourselves with ignorance, accept our own laziness, or "*continue to sin so that grace may abound*" (Romans 6:1). On the contrary, taking any of these courses would not make us any different from the world and would not testify to the power of the Gospel within us. We should strive for excellence in all we do. We should never forget that we are Christ's body and that we reflect him to the world. Many people first approach the faith when they recognize the excellence or intelligence of a Christian they encounter. But Christian humility should also be a means by which people are confronted with the genuineness of our message. When non-believers discern ongoing repentance and meekness in the lives of believers, they observe that which only the Spirit of God can effect.

As earthen vessels, we can admit our ignorance of an answer to a particular question, while at the same time holding fast to the idea of absolute truth. After all, we do not claim to be omniscient; rather we claim to know the One who is. Honesty is far more disarming than defensiveness. However, if a person discovers you have bent the truth in order to appear more knowledgeable than you actually are, they will probably conclude that Christians are no different from anyone else.

It is also fully in line with the apologetic of humility to be unbending about the truth of the answers that we do have. G.K. Chesterton aptly diagnosed the modern reluctance to affirm anything (a deceptive form of false-humility), writing:

*Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed.[3]*

As we point people to the truth, the need for apologetics is inescapable. We learn how to make arguments for the existence of God, for the truth of the Scriptures, for the deity and resurrection of Christ, and for countless other non-negotiables of the faith. As we build these arguments on sound logic, evidence, and scholarship, we must not divorce them from the message of the Gospel: Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief. When we falter in our own example, we can offer people a redeemer – our Redeemer.

I remember once receiving a decorative box as a graduation gift. Unwrapping the gift was awkward because I didn't know whether I should expect to find something more inside, or whether the box itself was the gift. As we offer the free gift of God's grace, let us make sure that the packaging points not to itself but to the treasure inside. It doesn't matter how impressed people are with our presentation or attractiveness if we are empty vessels. If we walk in humility, we will see the incomparable power of the Gospel at work, and we will learn to enjoy the rare pleasure of self-forgetfulness.

**References:**

[1] C.H. Spurgeon, *Pride and Humility*, Sermon 97. August 17, 1856.

[2] C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed., W.H. Lewis, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), 256.

[3] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1908), 36-37.

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