

James 4:13-17 Humility

The Bible presents humility to us as being a correct opinion of ourselves, coming from a correct understanding of who God is and what He has done. It repeatedly contrasts humility with pride as a life or death choice (2 Samuel 22:28, Psalm 147:6, Proverbs 3:34, Isaiah 66:2-4, Luke 14:11, 1 Peter 5:5-6).

Humility takes many beautiful forms, our focus here is how it relates to our trust in God. There is a natural logic to the humility of James 4:13-17 because all people have limited knowledge, and a limited lifespan. But Christians have even more powerful motivations for humility:

- God's existence and nature (e.g. James 1:17, Psalm 31:15, Proverbs 19:21).
- The story of salvation (Ephesians 1:4-5, John 3:16, John 3:5, Acts 16:14, James 1:18, Ephesians 2:1, 4-5, Hebrews 12:1, 1 John 1:9, Hebrews 7:25, 1 Corinthians 12:14-26, John 14:16, Romans 8:14, 26, 1 Corinthians 12:7, Galatians 5:16, 1 Corinthians 15:52, Revelation 21:5; see also Deuteronomy 8 for the Old Testament equivalent of this).

Paul summarises all this by asking, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7)

Humble trust that God is at work at all times, even in hard things (James 1:2, Romans 8:28), can be grown through what James commends to us:

- Recognise our ignorance, "you do not know what tomorrow will bring".
- Recognise our fragility, "you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes".
- Recognise our dependence, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that".

1. Ignorance

Learning and planning, thinking and discussing, expecting past behaviour to be the best indicator of future performance, are all normal parts of life. But sooner or later we have to hold up our hands and admit all that we don't know. We tend to experience this in moments of pressure and stress, so it's probably more fruitful to make time to reflect on this when things are calmer, meditating on God's great knowledge and power, and how unlike Him we are.

2. Fragility

Physical and mental fitness are blessings that we should steward well; abilities and opportunities are also His provision to be accepted gratefully and made the most of. But none of these things are guaranteed, and one day we will be without them.

Some Christians, reacting against a defeatist church culture and the public perception of Christianity as defeated, want to project confidence (2 Corinthians 10:17). The temptation for anyone thinking this way is that our confidence becomes located in ourselves – our plans and efforts and achievements – rather than in God. If His ways are small, slow, brought about through weakness and even suffering, then we may have a problem seeing what He's doing and hearing what He wants to tell us to do.

Seeming to have it all together, as individuals or churches, may not be the best way to demonstrate a humble trust in God.

3. Dependence

Fatalistic passivity is never commended in Scripture but humble faith in action is:

Asking God to take His place as the one who sets the agenda and brings it to success.

It might start for you by just saying, "God willing" or "I hope so" (with the Christian meaning of hope).

Prayer (John 15:5, Matthew 6:9-13), and with fasting (Ezra 8:21, Matthew 6:16-18).

Reading and obeying His Word, listening for His voice, asking for and acting on the counsel of His people. Refusing to assume that our personal or culturally-informed preferences are right.

Following His leading to attempt things that only He can achieve.

When we honestly admit our weakness, what we don't know and can't do, we're giving Him the opportunity to show His strength (2 Corinthians 12:9).

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Questions for small group discussion

- Has anyone experienced a change of plans recently?!
- Which of the reasons Luke listed gave you the strongest motivation to seek greater humility? (The reasons were: given that God promises wonderful things to the humble and terrible things to the proud, even the greatest of humans are so limited, life is so beyond our control, the Christian's story is all about what God has done and is doing and will do for us.)
- Does humble trust mean that we don't complain to God about what has happened, or lament it? What biblical resources do we have to help us understand this?
- Discussing one's own humility is fraught with difficulty, but what do you think it might look like for you in terms of trusting God for the future? (You can use the list of actions in point 3 above as a starting point for this.)
- What can a church do to grow in its humble confidence in God, and demonstrate this to the world?

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Resources

Books

Humility, Andrew Murray

The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness, Timothy Keller

Humble Roots, Hannah Anderson

Articles, etc.

[“Individualitis and The Dung Gate”](#), Andrew Wilson

[“N. T. Wright: The Pandemic Should Make Us Humble – and Relentlessly Practical”](#), *Christianity Today*

[“The Humility Revolution”](#), Centre for Public Christianity

[An explanation of biblical fasting](#)

Quotes

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.” (C.S. Lewis)