

'He must increase, but I must decrease'

Christ Love Assembly (RCCG), Barton, Oxford
20 Jan 2008

Ref. Passages: Phil 2:1-8; John 3:30

—*The two passages to be read out*

The two passages speak of two distinct contexts but a shared spirit. John the Baptist's statement came at the end of a conversation with his disciples who seemed worried that Jesus was encroaching on their teacher's 'brand copyright' to water baptism; they had come to complain to John. It was as if they skipped the session at which John had responded to earlier queries of who he was (John 1: 19-29). First it was a delegation from the priests and the Levites (John 1: 19-23); then another from the Pharisees (John 1: 24-28).

It did not matter that he was the older of the two cousins (Luke 1: 39-56) or the more famous of the two at the time. His constant emphasis had been to point others to Christ. And if the delegation from the Pharisees needed a lesson, here it was: In spite of the numbers flocking to him and his fame, John declared himself not worthy to untie the sandals of Jesus Christ. He did not consider himself worthy enough to baptise Jesus (Matt 3:13). When he did, it was about doing God's will (Matt 3:14). In what seems to be the closing phases of his ministry, John would cap his constant message with this glorious statement: Christ must increase; he must decrease. If John's disciples were worried about someone infringing on 'their franchise', John's message was Jesus is the franchise—and he would baptise not only with water but the Holy Spirit. Rather than moaning the disciples and others should rejoice like him because the bridegroom is here (John 3:29)!

Paul's earnest injunction to the Church at Philippi (a 'leading city of Macedonia') was not to a church without love or generosity. This was probably part of the Macedonian church whose devotion and generosity Paul used to encourage the Corinthians (2 Cor 8: 1-15). Philippi: the city of Lydia (Acts 16: 11-40) and the prison superintendent who gave his life to the Lord after witnessing the miracle of loosed chains and prison gates. In this passage, Paul seems to be referring to the same virtues which he commended them for in 2 Cor 8. John Darby suggests that in spite of their love, generosity of spirit, and so on, discord had crept into the church in Paul's absence. Paul's injunction here was "be like-minded; be of one accord; be of one mind." And how do we do that: be imitators of Christ; walk in the way of the Master; in 'true humility':

Let each of us hold others in higher esteem than ourselves; each one of us being less concerned about our own interest and more about what affects others—their interests, their pains, their needs, their triumphs—putting the interest of others above our own. Be imitators of Christ (Ph 2:3b-5)

As Charles Spurgeon enjoined us:

Jesus is the great teacher of lowliness of heart. We need daily to learn of Him. See the Master taking a towel and washing His disciples' feet! Follower of Christ, wilt thou not humble thyself? See Him as the Servant of servants, and surely thou canst not be proud! Is not this sentence the compendium of His biography, "He humbled Himself"? Was He not on earth always stripping off first one robe of honour and then another, till, naked, He was

fastened to the cross, and there did He not empty out His inmost self, pouring out His life-blood, giving up for all of us, till they laid Him penniless in a borrowed grave? How low was our dear Redeemer brought! How then can we be proud?

–Spurgeon’s Morning and Evening Devotional on Phil. 2:8.

If I stopped at v.8, it is not because the verses 9-11 are not important. Without the eternal truths contained in verses 9 to 11, we would be of all people, Paul once said, most miserable (1 Cor 15:19). We serve a living God. The exaltation of the name of Jesus that came by His humility and obedience to His Father is fundamental to our freedom. I stopped at v.8 because like the church in Philippi this concerns us greatly; it is one are we wrestle with in the body of Christ. It is easy to talk about humility; I am not sure it is easy to recognise when we start falling into the sin of ‘vainglory’ (KJV) or self ‘conceit’ (MKJV). True humility, the Bible enjoins us, comes with dying to Self; dying to the flesh.

Yet all around us, we are told that if we cannot love ourselves we cannot love others; that ‘learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all’—to quote a popular 1980s song. Contrast that with the real meaning of JOY: Jesus first, then Others, and Yourself last (Mark 12: 30-31; Luke 10:27). A new commandment, the Lord gave us “love one another even as I have loved you” (John 13:34; 15:12) Indeed, self-sacrificial love is what the Lord called the greater love (John 15:13). Meaningful life, which the ‘New Age’ psychologists think comes from self-love, actually lies in the opposite direction.

That He May Increase and I may decrease

Yet our service within the Lord’s vineyard—whatever the nature of our service—carries the constant danger of what in Old English is called being ‘haughty’. And here we go back to old John the Baptist, and what should be our constant prayer: that in whatever we do that Christ may increase and we may diminish. Whether in songs, Bible reading, prayer, ‘preaching’, in generosity of giving, in hospitality to others; that Christ may be exalted and we only vessels in the Master’s service. As the Weymouth translation puts it so beautifully (2 Cor 4:7):

We have this treasure in a fragile vase of clay, in order that the surpassing greatness of the power may be seen to belong to God, and not to originate in us.

None of these is possible without the constant work of the Holy Spirit. We bring Self under subjection not in anything that we can point to as within our power but with the gracious work of grace wrought for us on Calvary: for it is He who works in us both to desire and to do those things that please Him (Phil 2: 12-13).

When we look around us, we see examples of closer walk with the Lord producing greater measure of life humility:

- Two illustrations from Pastor Adebayo’s recent visit to Oxford.

As Isaiah puts it: **[Ask someone to read it: Is 66: 1-2]**

Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, And all those things exist," Says the Lord. "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word.

(Prov. 16:18-19, Ps 34:18, Is. 66: 1-2; Luke 14: 7-11; 22: 24-27, Eph 4:2)

[Ask someone to read it: Is 57: 15]

For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

The ease of humility

- By remembering constantly that whatever we are, who ever we are, we are by grace. As Paul notes, lest anyone of us should boast.
 - If I sing well, pray well, serve well, help arrange the chairs and flowers well, make tea and sandwiches for the after service, and so on it is by Grace.
- I strive daily to love Him more because He first loved me and gave up his glory and life for me!!

Apostle Peter enjoins us: ‘Therefore, humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, that he might exalt you in due time’ (1 Pet. 5:6). But before that verse is another that enjoins us to “gird yourself **with humility towards one another**, for God sets Himself against the proud **but gives grace to the humble**” (1 Pet 5:5).

The way up is the way down; in constant prayer; on our knees.

What humility is not...

There are many things that humility is not. Humility is not about being complicit in injustice and keeping silence in the face of evil.

- It was the same John the Baptist who spoke out against Herod and Herodias (Mark 6: 18)
- Christ not only spoke out against the inequities of His time, he drove out of the temple those who had turned it into a market place. (John 2: 15-16)

Even here it cannot be for vainglory or self-promotion; it is by humbling ourselves under the arms of the Lord; being led by the Holy Spirit.

- Jimí O. Adésínà