

GET LOW
REFLECTIONS ON PRIDE AND HUMILITY

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Whitecaps Media
Houston, Texas
whitecapsmedia.com

Get Low: Reflections on Pride and Humility

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ISBN-13: 978-0-9836825-8-5

FIRST EDITION

Cover designed by Stephanie W. Dicken. Book designed and edited by Kit Sublett for Whitecaps Media. Main body composed in Minion Pro, 11/14. Titles are in Blanch, a font designed by Atipus of Barcelona

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Printed in the United States of America

INTRODUCTION

My family owns a few acres near Hearne, the self-proclaimed “crossroads of Texas.” Hearne has three Tex-Mex restaurants (not counting the *panaderia* and the taco truck), two grocery stores, two dollar-style discount stores, two barbecue joints, two auto parts stores, and one bridge that spans railroad tracks and Highway 6. A few years ago, some visionary entrepreneur opened a sports bar in the middle of town. It is not exactly the ESPN Zone, but it seems to be a relatively successful venture. The sports bar serves as a refuge for the men of Hearne. Every Saturday and Sunday during football season, the parking lot of the sports bar is packed with dozens of pick-up trucks and one very old riding lawn mower. Many nights, I have seen the same gentleman wearing a sharp gold blazer and driving his riding lawn mower over the bridge towards the sports bar. I don’t know why he drives a lawn mower to the sports bar. He probably does it because he likes sports and/or bars, does not like walking, and does not mind looking ridiculous if that is what it takes to accomplish his mission.

Every time I see that fellow on the lawn mower heading into the heart of Hearne, I think about the so-called triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem:

Jesus, the disciples, and the great crowds were heading toward Jerusalem when they came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. Jesus stopped and beckoned to two of the disciples.

Jesus: Go to the village over there. There you'll find a donkey tied to a post and a foal beside it. Untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone tries to stop you, then tell him. "The Master needs these," and he will send the donkey and foal immediately.

He sent the disciples on ahead so His entry into Jerusalem could fulfill what the prophet Zechariah had long since foretold: "Tell this to Zion's daughter, 'Look—your King is approaching, seated humbly on a donkey, a young foal, a beast of burden.'"

So the disciples went off and followed Jesus' instructions. They brought the donkey and foal to Jesus, they spread their cloaks on the animals, and Jesus sat down on them. The great crowd followed suit, laying their cloaks on the road. Others cut leafy branches from the trees and scattered those before Jesus. And the crowds went before Jesus, walked alongside Him, and processed behind—all singing.

Crowd: Hosanna, praises to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Eternal One! Hosanna in the highest!

And that is how Jesus came into Jerusalem. The people noticed this strange parade. They wondered who this could be, this humble bearded man on a donkey who incited such songs.

Crowd: This is Jesus, the prophet, from Nazareth in Galilee.¹

¹Matthew 21:1–11 (*The Voice*).

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The whole strange scene was predicted by Zechariah. The shocking point of Zechariah's prophesy is that the King is humble.²

When the prophet says he comes riding on "an ass," he is contrasting him with "the chariot," "the war horse," and "the battle bow" (Zechariah 9:10). It is the fact that the King is a man of peace that is distinctive. In antiquity, a king would not enter his capital riding on a donkey. He would ride proudly, on a war-horse, or perhaps he would march at the head of his troops.³

Jesus came into Jerusalem as a humble King on a donkey, which was "a contradiction in terms."⁴ This was the entrance of "a King whose rule does not depend on political and military might," whose "inmost being is humility and meekness," and who is "the exact opposite of the great kings of the world"; a King who "rides on an ass—the mount of the poor, the counter-image of the chariot that he rejects."⁵ Moreover, he was not even riding on a well-bred donkey; this donkey is specifically identified as a "beast of burden."⁶ It was a lowly animal even by donkey standards.

Because we are so familiar with the story, and relatively unfamiliar with the way great and powerful kings and generals led triumphal processions in antiquity,⁷ we may miss the shock value

² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 520.

³ *Ibid.*, 521.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, 81.

⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 521.

⁷ Tom Holland offers the following vivid description of a Roman triumphal procession: "Driven through the grateful streets, born on the clamor of deafening applause and acclamation, a general on the day of his triumph

of the ways and means of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. To correct that problem, try to picture a great modern leader, on his way to a climactic battle or a diplomatic summit, driving a riding lawn mower. Don't picture the great leader operating a sexy new Toro SS 5060 V-Twin Hydrostatic Zero-Turn Riding Mower with Smart Speed™; picture the great leader pattering along on a rusty old junker. That is the way Jesus, the King of kings, entered Jerusalem. In retrospect, it is clear that he could not have accomplished the mission any other way.

The humility of Jesus is not a superfluous detail in the gospel narrative. The humility of Jesus is essential to the gospel. If Jesus lacked humility, there would be no incarnation, no crucifixion, and no redemption. John Howard Yoder's meditation on the downward mobility of God in Jesus—to the point of death on a Roman cross—makes this point well:

The path of the cross is not an accident. It is not a detour on the way to victory. It is not the bitter that we have to take with the sweet . . . it is not the bad news mixed with the good. It

became something more than a citizen, something more even than a man. Not only was he dressed in the gold and purple of a king, but his face was painted red like the holiest statute in Rome, that of Jupiter in the great temple of the Capital. To partake of the divine was a glorious, intoxicating, perilous thing, and during the few brief hours when it was permitted, a general became a spectacle of wonder and edification. To the Roman people who lined the streets to cheer him, he was living reassurance that ambition might indeed be sacred, that in struggling to reach the top, and to achieve great things, a citizen was fulfilling his duty to the Republic and to the gods" (Holland, *Rubicon*, 184–85). See also Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, 190, describing a Roman triumphal procession, and contrasting Rome's displays of power with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

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is the good news. Divine self-emptying *is* the gospel. It is the revelation of the way things are.⁸

Augustine of Hippo made the same point over 1,500 years ago:

What greater mercy is there than this, which caused to descend from heaven the Maker of heaven; which re clothed with an earthly body the One who formed the earth; which made equal to us the One who, from eternity, is the equal of the Father; which imposed “the form of a servant” on the Master of the world—such that the Bread itself was hungry, Fullness itself was thirsty, Power itself was made weak, Health itself was wounded, and Life itself was mortal? And that so that our hunger would be satisfied, so that our dryness would be watered, our weakness supported, our love ignited. What greater mercy than that which presents to us the Creator created; the Master made a slave; the Redeemer sold; the One who exalts, humbled; the One who raises the dead, killed?⁹

Because Jesus humbled himself, there is forgiveness, reconciliation, and a new creation. For those who want to follow Jesus, humility is a non-negotiable necessity. Augustine was emphatic about the necessity of humility:

Grasp the truth of God by using the way he himself provides, since he sees the weakness in our footsteps. That way consists first, of humility, second, of humility and third, of humility. Unless humility precedes, accompanies and follows up all the

⁸ Yoder, *He Came Preaching Peace*, 92.

⁹ Augustine, *Sermon 207*.

good we accomplish, unless we keep our eyes fixed on it, pride will snatch everything right out of our hands.¹⁰

This book is about living with humility in a world that has been vandalized by pride. I am convinced that the destructive consequences of pride are evident in every aspect of life, including the way we theologize, the way we consume, the way we give, and the way we work, as well as the way we face adversity, anxiety, death, and doubt. I am equally convinced the way to redeem every aspect of life is the way of humility. In this book, I am trying to make that case.

I am not an expert on the topic. In fact, the folks who know me best will testify that I am uniquely *unqualified* to write about humility. In spite of that—or maybe because of that—I have written this collection of essays for proud people who are called to imitate a humble King. I pray that the Holy Spirit will give us eyes to see the glory of God in the crucified Messiah, and to know that we have been given this treasure in “jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”¹¹

¹⁰ Augustine, *Letter 118*.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:7. Unless otherwise noted, all verses are the author’s translations.