

# Why and how to become humble?

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## What is Pride and Humility?

*"Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility." (Saint Augustine)*

*"Pride is God's most stubborn enemy! There is no sin so much like the devil as pride. It is a secret and subtle sin and appears in a great many shapes which are undetected and unsuspected."  
(Jonathan Edwards)*

*"There is perhaps not one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases; it is still alive. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility." (Benjamin Franklin)*

*"We are born helpless... We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves." (C. S. Lewis)*

*"Honest criticism is hard to take, especially when it comes from a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger". (Franklin P. Jones)*

Why is it that some strong spiritual leaders fall, leaving those who knew them in a state of shock? Why is it that some Christians divorce, leaving all their friends wondering why they did not see this coming? Why is it that some Christian leaders keep on hurting many people, and no one can tell them anything about it? Why is it that so many Christians can be actively involved in their churches all their life and yet never fundamentally change their characters?

The answer to all those questions is very simple: pride.

Pride is keeping the appearances instead of facing the truth and its corresponding painful changes. It is the very reason why most people do not want to change. Pride is the breastplate of all our insecurities, and finally, it is the very sin against the Holy Spirit. All sins can indeed be forgiven, except the ones that we do not want to recognize. It is not sin that sends us to hell, but our pride, which keeps us from repenting. In fact, hell, Satan, and every other evil in this world would not exist if pride did not exist. This one sin alone is at the very root of our rebellious nature, our sinful world, and every evil that has tormented our own lives. As Thomas Jefferson said, "Pride costs us more than hunger, thirst, and cold". If this sin is the primary cause of all other sins, as the Catholic Church teaches it<sup>1</sup>, we should make every effort to identify it, hate it, and finally destroy it. This is what I intend to do through this chapter.

The concept of pride is seen in some cultures with a dual meaning. When defined positively, it implies a high sense of one's value, revealed in self-respect and personal achievements. Such self-esteem becomes, on the contrary, negative when it is excessive, that is, inordinate and unreasonable. Now, when does positive pride become negative and out of bounds? The answer is quite simple: in a relationship with other people. For instance, a man stranded on a desert island cannot ever be accused

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<sup>1</sup> See under the seven deadly sins and pride in the Catholic encyclopedia (<http://www.newadvent.org>)

of being prideful if he is the only human being on that island. He can struggle with all sorts of sins, but negative pride will never be his problem as long as he is alone. It is only in dealing with others that our own vanity or arrogance is revealed.

In other words, it is not how we view ourselves that determines pride or humility, but how we view *others*. Dante defined pride as a "love of self-perverted to hatred and contempt for one's neighbor"<sup>2</sup>. Pride, therefore, is not in considering ourselves great and intelligent, but in seeing others as little and stupid. As long as we can win the interest of others without frontloading all of our attention grabbers, there is nothing prideful with believing in our great qualities. As long as we do not put down others through our intelligence, beauty, or accomplishments, there is nothing prideful in delighting ourselves in our value. Oppositely, humility is not expressed in how loudly we beat our chests, but in how loudly we lift others. In other words, our pride or humility is not measured in our self-esteem, but in how we cherish and elevate the self-worth of others. Humility, in simple words, is a choice to put others in priority before and above ourselves. As C. S Lewis pointed out, "each person's pride competes with everyone else's pride...If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest."<sup>3</sup>. This may be the final reason why, as Benjamin Franklin so wisely pointed out, that even "the proud hate pride ... in others!"

Now, if humility is how we see others, it is, at the same time, how we allow others to see us. If this quality is a one-way street where I can speak to you, but you cannot do the same with me, then it is not humility. In other words, humility is more than giving credit to whom credit is due, to perform charity anonymously, or not brag. It is allowing others to come to us in such a way that they are not afraid or uncomfortable to tell us how they see us. My reason for defining humility in this perspective is that nothing affects our self-esteem more than the perception of others of us. Nothing in this world is deeper and more central to our identity than the way we project ourselves to others and how others react to this projection. The way we allow others to enter our lives and speak to us is, therefore, the true essence of humility. Once a man has been willing to put down every single barrier of his heart and accept help from others, then he has started to practice biblical humility.

Humility is not just what you do for others, or what you do *not* do for yourself, it is what you let others do for you

The Scriptures, and the book of Proverbs in particular, are not only filled with injunctions about not looking down on others or bragging about ourselves, but also about seeking suggestions and corrections from others. We see this same attitude in the ministry of Jesus, where the disciples had to learn to be corrected in private and public situations, and where Jesus showed a radical openness about his struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Practically, humility should lead us to be active in four different areas. First of all, we need to learn the art of always seeking advice, even from unbelievers. Secondly, we need to welcome corrections from most people. Thirdly, we need a discipleship group where mutual accountability can

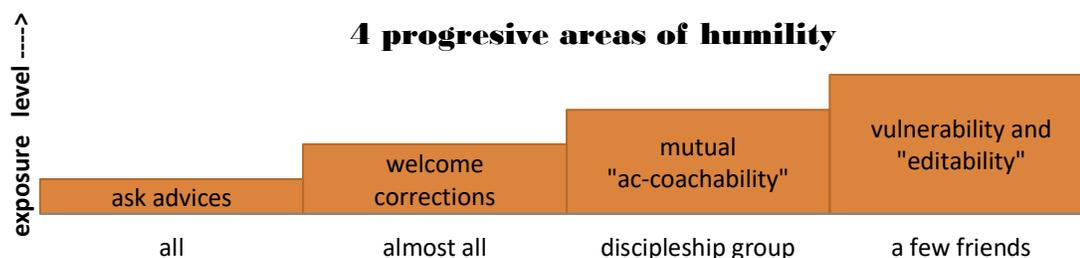
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<sup>2</sup> Dante Alighieri – when describing one of the seven deadly vices in the Purgatory of the Divine Comedy

<sup>3</sup> C. S Lewis, "Mere Christianity" Harper San Francisco, CA; New edition, 2001

take place. Fourthly, we need to choose a few friends with whom we can be vulnerable and receive character “editing”.

## The 4 means how to become humble



### 1. Seek advice from all people

Leonard Sweet humorously describes our contemporary world as “Egoland”. No, he writes, “it is not a theme park; it’s our homeland, our ecosystem, or what I call the egosystem. We are highly adapted organisms thriving in the egosystem habitat, where the law of the jungle is ‘what’s in it for me?’”<sup>4</sup>. One of the many consequences of this extreme individualism is that we try to learn and reinvent the wheel all by ourselves, instead of tapping into the huge potential of experimental wisdom that is all around us! The internet may provide much information, but not the wisdom that comes from others’ failures and life experiences. Furthermore, every single person in this world has something to teach us, from the wisest to the simplest person. Every single human being has at least one experience, one piece of special knowledge, or one skill that they can transfer to us, and the key is to develop a lifestyle of always asking and learning. Even unbelievers can teach us some lessons, as Jesus showed us when he said that the children of the world are wiser in some areas than those of the light.<sup>5</sup> To ask questions to learn from people is not just a good trick of making people feel important and “How to Make Friends”<sup>6</sup>; it is, at times, the surest way to protect us from unwise decisions and have great victories in our lives! Consider the following verses from the book of Proverbs:

*The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice (Prov.12:15)*

*Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice. (13:10)*

*Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. (15:22)*

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Sweet “11: Indispensable Relationships You Can’t Be Without” David C. Cook; Paris, Ontario Canada, 2008, p.54

<sup>5</sup> Luke 16:18

<sup>6</sup> Dale Carnegie, “How to Win Friends and Influence People” Pocket Books; New York, 1990

*Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end, you will be wise. (19:20)*

*Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance. (20:18)*

*Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel. (27:9)*

To try to do it all by ourselves can spare us many problems in life, as illustrated by the following real story: "While I was sitting in my parked car on the street one day, a young woman in the car ahead came over and asked me if I had a hammer that she could borrow. When I said no, she got one from the man in the car in front of hers. She then proceeded to smash out the vent pane on the side of her car. After returning the hammer, she opened her door, took out the keys, and waved them at us with a triumphant grin. As she drove away, the fellow who lent her the hammer came over to me and said, "If only she had told me what she wanted the hammer for, I think I could have helped her. I am a locksmith."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the above story is symbolic of how many of us proceed today. We may have struggles in our relationship with our spouse, with other Christians, or at work, but because we do not want to appear weak or ignorant, we do not ask for advice.

My own experience in life has taught me the following principles:

- 1) Ask for much advice, particularly in the areas where you are weak. I was never wrong to ask for too much advice in areas where I was unsure, and sometimes even in the ones where I was very sure!
- 2) Before every important decision, seek counsel from many mature Christians. As you do, be careful not to just keep asking additional people until you hear what you want to hear. Not all people can be wrong. Eventually, you will see a similar pattern of wise answers coming from enough people, particularly if they are wise believers.
- 3) Be sure to present the whole picture and be open about all your doubts regarding the advice you receive. People can only give you the best advice based on the information that you gave them. If you still want to appear wise and in control to have people telling you what you want to hear, then what is the whole point of asking?

## **2. Welcome corrections from most people**

To ask advice is only the first step of humility and ...wisdom. The scriptures invite us to a higher and even more challenging level, which is to seek corrections. Even with all the best advice in the world, we cannot go further than the limits of our characters. This is why we need to constantly work on them by seeking what the book of Proverbs calls rebukes, reproof, or corrections:

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<sup>7</sup> From the Readers' Digest

*Poverty and shame come to him who refuses discipline, but he who heeds correction shall be honoured. (13:18)*

*There is stern discipline for one who forsakes the way: Whoever hates reproof shall die. (15:10)*

*He is in the way of life who heeds correction, but he who forsakes reproof leads others astray. (10:17)*

*Whoever loves correction loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid. (12:1)*

*A scoffer doesn't love to be reproofed; He will not go to the wise. (15:12)*

*The ear that listens to reproof lives and will be at home among the wise. (15:31)*

*He who refuses correction despises his soul, but he who listens to reproof gets understanding. (15:32)*

*A rebuke enters deeper into one who has understanding than a hundred lashes into a fool. (17:10)*

*Better is open rebuke than hidden love. (27:5)*

From all the examples given above, we have the choice of considering corrections from two angles. We can view them as painful “reset” buttons that put the whole system back to square one, or we can consider them as “updates” that help us to run a much more efficient life. Every time we update, things work better and faster. The whole difference is our final perspective on life. If we are not interested in improving our characters, corrections will always come across as painful intruders that we have not invited, and eventually, they may not come back. Have you ever tried to give corrections to someone who hates them? After a few times, you will stop giving them, whereas those who welcome them will make you feel like you can always come back. If we consider painful changes as opportunities to grow, we will always surround ourselves with plenty of people to correct us.

This, for instance, is what David did with Nathan. The king not only sought counsel from him in areas like arts or politics<sup>8</sup>, but when his character was in question, he allowed the prophet to stick his bony finger in his face. David could have done what most kings usually did with prophets of bad news, but he chose otherwise, and his humility eventually “set him on the pathway to life”, as Prov. 10:17 teaches. He welcomed the correcting influence of his friend to such an extent that, eventually, he even called his last son “Nathan”!

This attitude of welcoming corrections is particularly important for leaders. Sometimes, some pastors surround themselves with yes men who will tell them only what they want to hear, and they will build a wall of protection where no one on their team or in their churches can approach them about what they see as being wrong. This is disastrous not only for themselves, but usually, such a bad example creates a culture of hypocrisy and gossip in their church. If the person who is supposed to be the most important influence over an entire congregation gives the message that no one can have any hint of criticism against him, then usually, such a church almost always ends up with divisions. If the Son of God himself allowed his disciples to rebuke him<sup>9</sup>, who are we to be different?

Those who have such humility in life will not only take corrections from friends, but sometimes even from outsiders. It is less painful to take corrections from people who care about us than from people who don't, but there is a danger in this. Sometimes our friends may like us so much that they do

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17: 1-15, 2 Chronicles 29:25, 1 King 1:11-40

<sup>9</sup> Mark 8:32

not tell us the whole truth, as it may be too devastating to us. Furthermore, friends may become blinded to our sins as they have grown to love us as we are. Strangers, on the contrary, are people who have no emotional attachment and interest in us, so they may see and tell us things that we never expected. This is usually the case with people at work, who mostly care about their interests first.

I am aware that for many of us, it is already difficult enough to invite corrections from friends, so that rebukes from outsiders may appear extremely painful. Again, all is a matter of final perspective. If, for instance, we want to succeed in one sport, we will not despise and reject the corrections of our coach. In the same way, if we want to have the best character for Christ, then every single correction will be welcomed as a training opportunity to win with him. As Robert Murray Mc Cheyne<sup>10</sup> wrote: "God will either give you what you ask, or...something far better."

### 3. Have a discipleship group where mutual accountability can take place

To be open to having anyone give us advice and corrections is certainly a good start on which we can gain some wisdom and character improvement, but it is limited. If we do not channel this attitude within the more restricted format of a few people who know us well, we may end up having only sporadic and superficial changes. Jesus left us a model of how we could grow and change: a small group of twelve disciples. If we could learn all that we need to learn by simply surfing on the wide ocean of humanity, then why did Jesus leave us the example of such a limited group? The reason is that most lessons the disciples learnt came within the context of their small group in interaction with the "outside" world. If you think of it, the Gospels are nothing but the story of one teacher, his small learning group, and the rest of the world watching. Some people would argue that since we have the Church today, most of our learning should come through a larger group dynamic. If this is the case, then what is the relevance of Jesus' model? My conviction is that we need both, and the early Church had this duality. The Church in Jerusalem had thousands of members and was growing daily, as they met in the temple courts (a large group dynamic) and yet they broke their bread in their homes (a small group dynamic)<sup>11</sup>. Paul had his small group wherever he traveled, and the model seems to have been practiced throughout the book of Acts and even repeated in the early medieval monastic movement<sup>12</sup>.

The primary reason Jesus set up his group of twelve was so that they could be with him and be empowered for their mission<sup>13</sup>. For this, Jesus not only gave them instructions on healing, exorcism, and all sorts of questions on religion, but he also addressed issues of their character as well. He rebuked their wrong motivations<sup>14</sup>, their unbelief<sup>15</sup>, their racial prejudices<sup>16</sup>, or their wrong religious

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Murray Mc Cheyne (1813 – 1843) was a minister in the Church of Scotland from 1835 to 1843

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:46-47

<sup>12</sup> For instance Columba spread Christianity to Scotland with his own group of twelve men, a model that came to be imitated in the Celtic Church (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columba>)

<sup>13</sup> Mark 1:17, 3:14

<sup>14</sup> Mark 8:33

<sup>15</sup> Luke 9:40-41

perceptions<sup>17</sup>, and he always did this within a small group dynamic. Contrary to our cultural tendency to make everything private and individualized, Jesus corrected his disciples openly in front of each other. Sometimes he even corrected his disciples in front of a crowd. After three years of this kind of radical openness, with no one having preferential treatment, they eventually learnt that it is OK to receive “public” corrections within a small group context. They not only “survived” but they became convinced that speaking the truth within this limited frame of close friends is the pattern of the Master, and it permeated the whole culture of early Christians.

Read, for instance, what Paul wrote regarding the primary reason Christians should have relationships between them. He wrote that “we proclaim him, admonishing and teaching *everyone* with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end, I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”<sup>18</sup> According to this passage, we should agonize (this is literary what Paul wrote in using the word “struggle”) to bring every single person to have maturity<sup>19</sup> in Christ. An interesting aspect of this process training is revealed through the Greek word admonish, which implies not only the idea of exhorting, but of warning, cautioning, and reproving<sup>20</sup>. The New Testament is filled with numerous references to mutual admonishments and even rebukes, which makes it clear that it can be not only practiced in one-on-one relationships, but in a small group format, as Jesus’ disciples experienced it. In other words, mutual encouragement, evangelism, and fun are all necessary within a small group, but if we do not get to the deeper level of “iron sharpening iron”<sup>21</sup>, we have missed the final purpose of the Church, which is to help each other become like Jesus.

So if we are to imitate today the same model of Jesus, we should all be involved in a small group dynamic where we are not afraid to be open and accept corrections in front of each other, in order to become more like Jesus. Now, if we are truly convinced of this ultimate goal, then the concept of mutual accountability should not be seen as something to be afraid of, but as one of the best methods to change our characters. Unfortunately, the word “accountability” is often associated in the minds of many with a judgmental attitude, which is constantly looking out for offenses and monitoring our behavior. If we were to use the term “edit-ability”, a term that Joe Myers developed in “Organic Community”<sup>22</sup>, then we may have a more proactive approach to the whole idea of receiving corrections. Even the best writers need some editing, just like the best athletes are seeking to have the most excellent coaches. Instead of being “accountable”, we could even use a term I have invented myself: “ac-coachable”!

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<sup>16</sup> Luke 9:55

<sup>17</sup> Mark 9:39-40

<sup>18</sup> Colossians 1:28-29

<sup>19</sup> Mature is a better translation from the Greek than perfect, although perfection implies the correct idea that we will never be mature enough

<sup>20</sup> Noutheteo from *noús* = mind + *títhemi* = place, literally means to place in the mind and so to warn or give notice to beforehand especially of danger or evil. The idea is to lay it on the mind or heart of the person, with the stress being on influencing not only the intellect, but also the will, emotions and disposition. The idea is to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct.

<sup>21</sup> Proverbs 27:17

<sup>22</sup> Joseph R. Myers, “*Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect*”, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 132-43

This kind of humility leading to character transformations was just as needed in the 1970s as it is today, such that a very influential movement called the “shepherding movement” emerged at that time and even gave birth to some denominations<sup>23</sup>. The focus was vulnerability and accountability, but at the same time, it was tied to unbiblical structures of authority known theologically as “covenant relationships”. People were called to submit all areas of their lives and obey their “shepherds” or leaders, which eventually led to controlling and very abusive behavior. The disastrous result of this deadly mixture is not just that the movement eventually dissolved, but it left a bad taste in the whole concept of being open and editable.

Despite this tragedy, I believe that the concept of mutual “editability” still has its biblical validity if we evacuate the element of punishment or manipulating pressure. In settings outside the Church, accountability must have practical means to measure and punish, or else it has no authority to bring about the very changes that are needed in such a system. But in the Church, authority should be considered in a very different light. People are more or less<sup>24</sup> free to choose whether they want to change or not, and therefore, the motivation should not be fear and legalism. This, in my opinion, is the primary reason that such a call to help each other change should be balanced with the motivation of grace, which is a total acceptance of each other. If people build an atmosphere of reciprocal openness without a strong emphasis on grace, they will not only avoid the same mistakes that the shepherding movement did, but they will also have a stronger motivation in welcoming changes. Once people know that they do not have to change to be accepted by others, they can start to change for God and themselves. This is the most powerful motivation that one could seek to have in looking for advice and corrections within a small group.

At the core of the false self is the belief that my value depends on what I have, what I can do, and what others think of me  
(Basil Pennington)

#### 4. Choose yourself a few friends with whom you can be vulnerable and receive “editing.”

A small group is a step higher on the path to humility and subsequent changes, but it is not deep enough. It has the advantage of bringing a richness of different insights because of its diversity, but then it may lack the depth of intimacy that only comes with just a few friends. Even the Lord himself could not be close to all the twelve disciples, and this is why he limited himself to only three: Peter, James, and John. This limited group of close friends experienced not only his *transfiguration* on Mt Tabor, but his *disfiguration* in Gethsemane, as he radically opened himself to them. The perfect Lord of the Universe chose to reveal his struggle in front of his best friends, leaving us the unequivocal example that God wants us to be vulnerable in our close friendships.

<sup>23</sup> Maranatha ministries or “the International Church Of Christ”, in which I was myself involved a few years until I left for the above mentioned reasons

<sup>24</sup> I am not talking about the obvious changes that Christians must do in order to not be “punished” by their local Church, like refusing to repent of sins that bring shame on the reputation of the Church (stealing, sexual immorality, etc...)

The same pattern is repeated in Paul, who said of Timothy that he knew *everything* about his way of life and suffering<sup>25</sup>, such that he felt there was no other one like Timothy who had proven himself in such an exemplary way<sup>26</sup>. In other words, Paul had been able to have a deep intimacy and spiritual impact on him because he was himself open with his protégé. Unlike some leaders who want to have a one-way relationship where they only show their strengths, Paul had never been afraid to be himself with his spiritual son. The supreme example of Jesus had convinced him that we do not have to pretend to be what we are not. Eventually, our true blue always comes out anyway. This kind of vulnerability on the part of people who are “stronger” than us, whether it is Jesus, Paul, or other mentors, should be a powerful invitation for all of us to do the same.

It must be emphasized again here that Jesus, in his weakest moment, did not take all his twelve disciples with him, but only his inner circle. We are not called to be open with our sins and struggles with everyone, but only with a few friends we have chosen. If we still choose to be open with people who are not close friends, we have to be selective about how open we want to be, as complete transparency is not always wise. For instance, some young Christians may be shocked that we, more mature Christians, are still struggling with some sins, while people who are not close to us may unnecessarily leak out our confessions. Furthermore, opening up with people who are not going to stick around to help us on the long haul is not always constructive. If we want to change, which is the reason we open up with our struggles, we should rather do it with people who can commit themselves to “follow up” on us. This limitation to only two or three friends is particularly important if we struggle with certain sins that may alienate us from our small group, like, for instance, confessing sexual sins within a mixed group (or confessing homosexual sins in a men’s group!). If, eventually, the help of the few friends proves itself not helpful, such that it may lead to serious consequences, then a more “public” form of confession may be required. It seems that such is the case of James 5:15-16, where the sins of some have led them to become sick and loaded with guilt, and James tells such persons to go to the Church leaders (but not to the entire church) to confess their sins to be forgiven and healed.

This model of transparency is not new to the NT, but it has its Jewish roots in the example of Jonathan with David. The former stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, including his sword and his bow, and his belt. They eventually made a covenant with each other that expressed itself in lifelong loyalty. Jesus had the same kind of intimacy with his friends, particularly the three, and so did Paul with Timothy. For those of us who are married, we obviously should nurture the kind of vulnerability that leads to character changes with our spouses, but it is not enough, as outside relationships with friends of the same sex bring a balance that our mate will never be able to bring us in the same way. David recognized that the love of women was not the same.<sup>27</sup> This dimension is particularly needed regarding corrections that deal with sensitive issues, because sometimes it is easier to listen to a friend than our spouses!

I have experienced such friendships in my own life with a few men, before and after marriage, and they have not only helped me to believe in deep friendships, but they have radically altered my

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<sup>25</sup> 2 Tim.3:10-11

<sup>26</sup> Phil. 3:20

<sup>27</sup> 1 Samuel 20:3

character. I consider this kind of openness one of the best blessings of the Christian life and the very essence of what the Church is all about, as Jesus himself demonstrated with his disciples. This is the reason he told us to love each other in *the very same way* that he loved his disciples<sup>28</sup>.

I am convinced that such biblical relationships are still possible today if we are willing to overcome the following obstacles:

## **The 5 main reasons why vulnerability and editability are difficult for us:**

### **1. We want to make all the changes by ourselves.**

This is particularly true of the western culture, where we have been trained not to feel any need for interdependence in our relationships, or in cultures of “survival” where you cannot depend on anyone but yourself. For instance, most books that have to deal with character changes today not only start and end with us, but it is all through us. It seems that what others have to tell us regarding our weaknesses is hardly included in the process, as it is all about self-discovery, self-assessment, and self-development.

Furthermore, our culture of protecting our confidentiality is such that we are very cautious in how far we tell the truth to our friends, and even more careful in how we protect our private lives. Privacy has been elevated to such a sacred and untouchable level that even the Church has adopted it as the accepted norm. Whenever we do not want anyone to tell us anything that may be regarded as intrusive, we protect ourselves behind the sacrosanct walls of our private lives. This may be what our extremely individualist culture trains us to feel, but the Scriptures repeatedly show us that a major factor in shaping our characters comes through the input and help of others. The “one another” concept is the primary reason the Church exists.

### **2. We cannot admit that others can see as much about us as we can see about them.**

Here is the greatest paradox and aberration in all our relationships: we think that we have all the objectivity to see what is wrong in others, but somehow we believe that others cannot have the same clarity about us. Now, some people are not really capable of making good moral judgments, but our limited experience in relationships has taught us that Abraham Lincoln was still correct in his observation of most people:

“You may fool all the people some of the time, you can even fool some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all the time.”

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<sup>28</sup> John 13:34

In other words, most people are capable of seeing certain things about us that we may not see about ourselves, and this is even more true of those things that we are not willing to see about ourselves. The truth is that if we are ready to accept the editing judgments of others on us, we will eventually find out that most people are not as unintelligent and prejudiced as we may be tempted to believe. If most people tell us over and over again that we have a specific problem in our character, this should be a good indication that we have such a problem! This should be particularly true of well-intentioned Christian friends who do not want to hurt us. When Jesus told us as Christians that we should correct and instruct one another, he was saying that most people in His church have some degree of objectivity. I am not talking here about doctrinal views or innovations of faith that take the courage to go against the mainstream, which is what revivals and spiritual reformations are all about; I am talking about basic character traits. If we are insensitive in our dealings with others, most Christians should be able to see it. If we are arrogant, most of our brothers can see it. If we are selfish, most of the Church can see it. If we are lazy, even unbelievers can see it! If we stick around some people, then eventually we can see most of their sins. If this is so, why do we have such a hard time accepting that people cannot have the same view of us? I know that what I am writing here is the most obvious truth in the entire universe, but it is the least practiced as well. What is the main reason that we act like this?

### 3. We are afraid to be rejected or to be less loved.

Every single human being on this planet has a very deep and often unconscious longing to be accepted and loved by others, which is often expressed in the image we give to others. For this, we will not only do everything we can to give our best impression to others, but what is more, we will do everything so that others do not have a *bad* impression of us. The first one is called positive pride; the second one is negative pride. When we do not want others to see what is bad in us, we can choose to either get rid of the bad stuff or ... to keep it and prevent others from seeing it. The more we keep a distance between us and those who may show us the problems, the more our negative pride grows. Eventually, it can be so thick and so unconscious that we are not aware of how prideful we are. The best way to test how prideful we are is to be open and allow editing of others in our lives. In biblical language, this is called “expose it to the light”. Jesus already spoke about this deep universal problem when he said that “everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light *for fear that his deeds will be exposed*. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light”<sup>29</sup>. The fear of exposure is the surest sign of how much we love the light and how much we are willing to hate evil, because evil loves to keep things hidden.

To project us  
and  
To protect us  
are the two legs  
of all our  
relationships.

According to John 3:20-21 a person who does not want to be exposed before his friends loves the darkness more than the light, and this reveals the extent of her pride as well.

It should be emphasized that most unbelievers are protecting themselves with the pride of not wanting to be exposed, because they usually do not have the security of unconditional love in their midst. Their

<sup>29</sup> John 3:20-21

friends will usually accept them based on their sins or how much they are willing to change. This is a perfectly understandable pattern among non-Christians as their love among them is fully conditional.

In the church, however, it should not be so, as we have to learn the kind of unconditional love that never rejects people, however sinful they are. If we can build an atmosphere among us of unconditional acceptance, then we will be more inclined to open up. Having said this, we must still learn to depend on God's grace, because even if some Christians cannot fully accept us, God already has, and this should be our main motivation in becoming transparent. At this point, some of my readers may wonder how far we can go in being open. Are there no real dangers in making ourselves vulnerable to editing?

This leads us to another obstacle:

## 4. We are afraid of being manipulated or blackmailed

Some believers have experienced that their confessions to their "friends" have leaked out in the open, so that they do not want to open up again. I understand that public exposure can be very humiliating, but eventually we have to ask ourselves what matters the most: our reputation before God or what people think of us? If people spread false rumors about us that have nothing to do with the truth, we should take measures to protect ourselves by making the truth public, but if people hear about our sins, eventually, this should not be our concern. As long as we keep on repenting, God will be our protection. As Abraham Lincoln said, "Reputation is the shadow. Character is the tree." Let us therefore focus on our own changes, and not the moving shadow of what people think of us. If we are really focused on changing, God will in fact, use our very sins to His glory by presenting us to the world as transformed people. There is nothing more powerful than the testimony of someone who can openly say: "yes, it is true that I am still struggling to change this, but God has started to bring real transformations in me". This is what Jesus meant when he said that "whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done *through* God."<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, a person who is not concerned about his reputation cannot ever be blackmailed. What can you say against a man who has nothing to hide about himself and tries his best to change? It is only those who tried to hide things that eventually get themselves in trouble, because they not only refused the help that would have come with their confessions, but they ruined their reputation by giving a wrong impression.

Finally, what is the ultimate reason we are afraid to open up?

## 5. We are afraid to change, for changes are painful

When everything has been said and done, this is the main reason why we do not accept what others want to tell us. As Dave Benner wrote, "the truly spiritual life is not an escape from reality but a total

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<sup>30</sup> John 3:21

commitment to it. Most of us are quite willing to embrace reality when it fits with how we see ourselves and the world, and when it is not overly unpleasant. However, when our life experiences confront us with things about ourselves that we are unwilling to accept, we call on psychological defense mechanisms to help maintain a sense of safety and stability. While these unconscious strategies help with short-term coping, they block long-term goals. This is because they distort reality. Ultimately, the function is to protect us from the unpleasant truth.”<sup>31</sup>

If we have built unconscious walls of not easily allowing anyone to correct us, the most painful and liberating step is to recognize this problem and start opening up. As we know from Alcoholics Anonymous, “Admitting that we are powerless over sin and in need of a Power greater than ourselves to restore us to sanity”<sup>32</sup> is not the only step, but it is the first and most decisive one. Once a person has admitted that it is difficult to open up and receive corrections from others, then a major transformation can follow. This is why this first step is so crucial in the whole process, and it is often the main reason some people avoid it as they unconsciously foresee the avalanche of possible painful changes behind. But opening this door can lead us to gradually become “several dimensions better” and end up as a “great piece of heart work”<sup>33</sup>

## **Matt. 5 and 18: the acid test of humility**

If we are not afraid of being exposed to what others think of us, then there is a good way to test it. Our sins eventually come out in our relationships with others, such that the way we solve conflicts reveals what we think of our sins. Jesus said that if we “are offering our gift at the altar and there remember that our brother has something against us, we should leave our gift there in front of the altar, first go and be reconciled to our brother and only then come and offer our gift”<sup>34</sup>. In essence, our Lord is telling us that if we are aware that a believer we know<sup>35</sup> has a problem against us, it is *our* responsibility to take the initiative to go to the person and seek to be on good terms with her. Often, I hear believers saying, “I know that this person has something against me, but this is not my problem; let her come to me if she wants, but I won’t”. This goes in complete disobedience against what Jesus said. He said that if we are aware that someone we know feels bad about us, we must be the ones taking the painful initiative to immediately go to that person, without waiting<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, according to Matt. 18:15-17, if that person refuses to listen to us, then we must take another person to solve the problem. If it is not possible, we have to take a bigger mediation group until we have reached a complete reconciliation.

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<sup>31</sup> David G. Benner, *“The Gift of Being Yourself – The secret call to Self-Discovery”*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> The first two laws of the 12 AA steps

<sup>33</sup> Reggie Mc Neal *“Practicing Greatness – 7 Disciplines of Extraordinary Spiritual leaders”*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2006

<sup>34</sup> Matt. 5:23-24

<sup>35</sup> This must be a known person (a brother) as it implies the idea that we offended him in a way that needs a reconciliation. If it were anyone who does not like us but that we have not personally offended, then we could spend our lives trying to be in good terms with others!

<sup>36</sup> The not waiting is implied in the next verse, because the longer we wait, the worse the situation can become

By the way, this pattern of gradually exposing ourselves to larger groups in order to solve conflicts should be applied to marital conflicts. It is only when people are willing to go through the possible pain and embarrassing shame of being exposed that they show how much they humbly seek the truth and want to save their marriage!

Through those two rules, Jesus is not only testing how much we want to be fully united in our relationships, but also how humble we want to become. Those who have nothing to fear from the truth are not afraid to be exposed. In essence, the humble are saying that they are not afraid to have others show them their sins, because they are always ready to listen and change. If they are in disagreement with the other person, the humble have no problem inviting their whole church to solve the conflict, because they try to live with a clear conscience that seeks the whole truth. The prideful, on the contrary, are terrified to start a process that may force them to publicly admit that they have sinned. They will avoid any conversation that involves others, because eventually they might be exposed.

In this aspect, I am not talking about a doctrinal issue or opinion that leads us to have differences between us, but about a conflict that is caused by a character issue. If our brother has something against us that necessitates a reconciliation, then this has mostly to do with how we have treated each other, and this boils down to our characters. Jesus is not saying that most Christians will agree doctrinally<sup>37</sup>, but he says indirectly through Matt. 18, that most Christians have discernment on moral issues. Indirectly, Jesus is saying that most believers can have discernment in situations when our brother sins against us, which means that “we cannot fool all the people all the time”. In other words, the process of Matt. 5 and 18 works as a very good test of how humble we desire to be!

Do you want to “assimilate humility” in your life? Take the “acimility” test!

THE “ACIMILITY” (The acid test of humility):

- Your Christian friend has something against you: Have you tried to talk to him?
- You came to a disagreement after this: Have you tried to bring further mediation?

## Some practicalities in the « ac-coachability » process

- Define clearly right at the beginning of your friendship that you intentionally seek to have a mutual vulnerability that will make both of you ac-coachable to each other (if you hope that it will “naturally” come by your example of opening up, and if it only goes one way, as the other person does not open up, you will waste your time and be hurt)
- After some time of getting to know each other in enough situations, do not hesitate to ask openly: “So what do you see in me that you feel needs to change?”

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<sup>37</sup> 1 Cor. 11:9 For there must of necessity be differences of opinion among you, in order that it may be plainly seen who are the men of sterling worth among you (Weymouth New Testament)

- Take the initiative to always ask how the other person feels about you. Usually, if the other person feels that you are not on the defensive, because you first asked, then it will be easy for that person to tell you things in a way that is not nervous or frustrated.
- Listen very clearly to what you have been told, repeating in your own terms what you have heard until the other person can confirm that it is so (“If I heard you correctly, you told me that I am this and this, is this correct?”)
- If you are not sure whether the other person is correct in her assumption of you, ask her if it is OK to invite another person to share her view of you as well. If the other person is humble, she will not mind bringing someone else.
- Thank sincerely the person for having told you the truth, so that the other person will feel at ease to always come back to you after this. If they feel that you resist their editing, you are making it harder for them to be frank with you.
- Expect that within a few months, you will have a very clearly defined list of your strengths and weaknesses (you should be able to put it all on one piece of paper)
- Do not just confess your sins or accept corrections but make a concrete plan with your friend of what it will take to change (if it is not followed by a plan of specific and ongoing changes, the whole issue of openness is almost useless. It would be the same as a Mafioso confessing his sins to a Catholic priest)
- Be ready to include a “deliverance” dimension to your confession (that is, having your friends pray that possible demonic influences may leave your life). Admitting that we have sins or being ready to listen to what others show us is a good first step, but it may not be enough, as spiritual strongholds can still be in our lives. In some cases, we need *both* confession and prayers of deliverance. James 5 says that we not only need to confess our sins, but we need prayers for deliverance as well (the word healing in Greek can be translated as deliverance as well).

## What are the positive results of biblical humility?

- The most obvious and immediate result is that we gain a greater objectivity in seeing ourselves as we are, and not as we would like to project ourselves to others.
- The more we train ourselves to be humble and not be on the defensive, the easier it is to listen to corrections or warnings, as it has become a part of our character.
- If we have the reputation of being humble, people will not be afraid of approaching us in a way that is comfortable for them and for us, such that most of our relationships and possible conflicts will be smooth.
- We become far more intimate in our friendships because we are authentic.

- Our relationships will last long, because we have put mutual humility between us.
- People will respect us more for being real, rather than discovering later that we only gave wrong impressions.
- By our example, we give an excellent motivation for anyone to open up and change (if you want others to change, start giving the example yourself!).
- Our self-esteem increases dramatically.
- We walk in the light, so that Satan cannot use our hidden sins or our blind spots to destroy us.
- We are free from what others think of us (we do not have to protect our reputation).
- People cannot easily hurt us because we are easily used to being exposed to the truth.
- We can become more like Jesus and be used by him

## **Are you a humble or a prideful person? A practical checklist**

Answer the following 14 questions with yes or no, preferably with the help of someone who knows you well:

1. When someone corrects you, are you most of the time silent, and do you listen carefully without ever interrupting the other person and justifying yourself?
2. If someone tells you that you did something wrong, can you repeat in your own words what the other person told you that you did wrong? (showing by this that you listened very carefully to the accusation against you)
3. If you are not sure you did something wrong, do you always ask the other person to give you some time to think about it?
4. If you recognize you did something wrong, do you easily and quickly apologize?
5. Do you feel you are absolutely 100% responsible for everything you feel, say, and do in life?
6. Can you clearly and objectively see the present weaknesses and sins of your character?
7. Do you have a plan and goals to change those weaknesses and sins of your character?

8. Do you now have people in your life who challenge you, correct you, and sometimes put pressure on you so that you can improve your character?
9. Do you easily submit, obey, and take directions from all sorts of authority (work, parents, church, government, etc.)?
10. Do you always seek advice when making important decisions?
11. When you meet new people, do you easily ask questions to learn things about them and from them?
12. When you are exposed to a Bible doctrine or even to any new idea that is contrary to what you believe, do you always ask questions and have the intellectual discipline to thoroughly study it so that you can clearly explain why you disagree with it?
13. Do you easily hide your strengths when talking with people? (You do not let them know how much you know, what you achieved, the important persons you know, etc....)
14. Are you a transparent person? (People easily know your present struggles and weaknesses)

### **Summary:**

- Do you easily seek advice and learn from anyone in any situation?
- Do you easily seek and welcome corrections from most people?
- Do you have a small group of believers who give you ongoing advice, corrections, and mutual accountability?
- Do you have a few trusted friends with whom you can be open about anything in your life?
- Have those friends “edited” you in such a way that you have a very clear picture of your strengths and weaknesses of character, as well as a concrete plan for how to improve?