

The Humility Talks

Summary and Analysis by Ev Worthington

The Humility Talks—Live wrapped up last night with a talk by Donnie Davis, former Christ Pres attendee (2006-2011) and now Associate Professor of Counseling at Georgia State University. Donnie heads “The Happy Lab” (Tongue-in-Cheek Motto: “The Most Humble People in the World”).

All five talks are still online at the Christ Pres website if you missed them.

I have summarized each talk in some detail. Each summary would take about three minutes to read. Although reading my one-page summary of each is much quicker than listening to the recording, you will miss a lot of the charm and personality of the presenters if you just read the summary. Still, for the busy folks who don’t have 45 minutes to listen but can spare 3 minutes to read, they are below.

This document includes:

- A. eight top themes from the talks
- B. a summary of each talk
- C. an analysis of the series, including 15 main points.

A. Eight Themes from the Five Talks—in Super-Fast Motion

1. Christian humility begins with spiritual humility, which is humility in the face of God.
2. Donnie reminded us that one of our great problems with becoming humbler is that we can sometimes focus on short-term pain and, although we know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose, we can take charge—which is (in a way) declaring that we know better than God. (We would never consciously say that, but sometimes our actions bely it.)
3. Disruptive changes invite us to get to a place of humility (as Karen and Darlene noted). But as humans, we might fight it at first, and (like Jesus in the Garden), there is nothing wrong with fighting against it if we ultimately arrive at a place of trusting God. Even if we fail to arrive at that place of trust, God does not stop inviting us.
4. Humility involves being right-sized in our self-focus—not too much, but not oblivious to the self either—and it involves serving others (as Daryl showed), which flows from Jesus as our example (Phil 2).
5. I love Corey’s picture of the tree whose insides were eaten up and crowded out by the ivy. It is a cautionary tale that urges us to seek to become humbler. Effort is okay; earning is not. But don’t expect a miracle transformation. Remember the 10,000-hour rule that Donnie offered. Remember that humility is also a journey from Good Friday

- to Easter, but passing through Holy Saturday, which is a day of struggle, of victory and defeat, of uncertainty (as Micah McCreary offered).
6. Humility is tied up with other virtues. In this time of history, social justice is of great concern. To paraphrase Micah 6:8, you know, O humans in the 21st century, what the Lord requires of you: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. It is not just a time for social justice, but it is a time of social division. God also desires of us that we be forgiving people—especially to those who have hurt and misunderstood us. I was challenged deeply by Micah’s call to pursue justice and to be a wounded healer who is also a warrior healer.
 7. Fortunately, we have something that can aid with Christian humility that people who do not name Christ as savior do not have—the Holy Spirit within.
 8. We can rest in knowing, as Daryl pointed out and others alluded to, that humility has temporal benefits. It provides social oil that greases social interactions, and it helps heal social hurts. Nice to know. We don’t pursue humility for those benefits, but when we pursue God, it’s nice to know that benefits do come along.

B. Three-Minute Summaries of Each Talk

Daryl Van Tongeren (February 24)

Daryl Van Tongeren, also a former Christ Pres attendee (2009-2011), is now Associate Professor of Psychology at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Daryl gave a good introduction to what is known scientifically about humility. Among the things he pointed out was what humility, differentiating between existential humility (humility in the face of God) and temporal humility (how we act toward others). Humility is being right-sized. It’s being aware of ourselves—not too much, not too little. It’s about being oriented toward helping others—not being cold to needs, but not being a doormat.

He pointed out that humility is important for several reasons. First, it is a signal that the other person cares and values us. Second, it smooths conflict and power struggles. Third, it reduces relational wear and tear. Humility provides a sense of psychological security. When we run after elevating our self-worth, we are prone to fragility and defensiveness. When we become more humble, we develop a self-worth that isn’t dependent on achievement. Because the world today encourages one-up-man-ship, it is hostile to humility. It cultivates narcissism, entitlement, self-love, and seeing the world as a mere venue for our use. The end result is that we engage with the world in a way that is biased in favor of the self, thinking I’m not as bad as others, they aren’t as good as I am.

Daryl suggested three actions to become more humble. Open eyes, open mind, and open heart. *Open eyes* means seek feedback from others and adopt a mindset of growth, not of perfection. *Open mind* suggested less defensiveness, affirming others we love, and being comfortable with the idea that we can be wrong. *Open heart* advocated empathy, reflecting on our own shortcomings, thinking of others, and seeking to have a wide (rather than self-focused) view.

Finally, “practice makes potent” encourages us to practice humility until it becomes a habit. Remember, though, humility is the by-product of serving others, not the goal of a self-perfection project.

Daryl closed with an observation that it is possible that there is a dark side to humility. He noted first that humble people cannot be too humble. By definition, humility is about being right-sized. But we can take each aspect of humility to unhealthy extremes. We can be too or not-enough self-aware. We can be too or not-enough oriented to others. One possibility is that humble people—those who seek to lift others up—can be taken advantage of and exploited by unscrupulous others. Second, some power-hungry people have used humility to keep others oppressed.

Humility is not the only virtue, and it might (or might not) be the most-important virtue. But humility is wrapped up integrally with other Christian virtues—altruism, agape love, faith, hope, generosity, gratitude, and self-control. And humility might also set us on the path to discovering wisdom.

Daryl gave a Christian-consistent summary of what science knows about humility, so that was a good basis for the series. I spent more time summarizing that talk than the others because it was an important base. Daryl’s warning about how humility is a Christian virtue—Augustine said, the most important Christian virtue—and yet unscrupulous people can take advantage of and oppress humble people and then advocate humility to keep people oppressed is a good jumping off point for the second talk in the series, Micah McCreary.

Micah McCreary (March 3)

The Reverend Dr. Micah McCreary is current President of New Brunswick Seminary (New Jersey). Previously, he was a pastor for 12 years and a professor of Counseling Psychology and administrator at VCU.

Micah gave a sermon on Haggai, reflecting on the community and on asking difficult questions. The most intriguing question Micah raised for me was the awareness that it probably is not a good idea to focus on humility as an ideal state. Rather, it is important to see that people grow into humility—like Hansel and Gretel following the bread-crumbs dropped by those who have gone before us. Also, people who have been oppressed and who have been held under oppression by admonitions to be more humble will have a developmental path toward humility. The first steps of the path might emerge out of a holy rage against the abuses—current and past—of power. The rage is aimed not at destruction but at healing. If a person views himself or herself as nothing, then a message that he or she should be humble, meek, and mild might not be the message for now, but rather a message that the person must grow into.

We are all broken, just in different ways. We need to be comfortable helping people who are broken, and often we try to fix broken people and broken systems because we are not following the bread-crumbs dropped by our elders, ancestors, and those who came before.

Micah recounted the story told by Henri Nouwen about the wounded healer. The wounded healer—the Messiah—is the savior who will be found at the gate, where the wounded people, the least and the lost, are. How will we know him? He too will be wounded, and he will be first attending to his own wounds and then turning to help the others with wounds. Nouwen encourages us to get in touch with Christ-within and be wounded healers. But Micah also noted that we have a warrior side as well as a healer side. We have a warrior who is willing to turn over tables in the temple, to confront the Pharisees, to confront and defeat death itself. Both of these are accessible to each Christian because we have Christ within. So, Micah encouraged us not just to focus on humility. We were encouraged to embrace the fullness of Christ within—the healer who is not afraid to confront injustice even if it stirs things up and the warrior who does not seek war to destroy but rather seeks conflict when it is needed to heal.

There is a developmental path to humility. We are wounded, broken, and part of a system that is also wounded and broken. That is Good Friday. There is also Easter, the time of resurrection, the time of humbly worshipping a triumphant and loving God. But we are now living in Saturday in which we must move from broken and wounded to humility, and that will inevitably require tapping into the Christ-within who took on injustice and oppression. He stayed humble. That was his nature. But humility was appropriate for the situation. In moving from the crucifixion of Holy Friday to resurrection Sunday—as we are in this time of uncertainty in our country and in our place in the unfolding in time of God’s plan (already, but not yet seeing the glory of God), that is the time when humility is vital.

Corey Widmer (March 10)

Corey is senior pastor of Third Church. He formerly served at East End Fellowship and as an Associate Pastor at Third Church, and earlier in his career, he assisted John Stott.

Corey cut down a tree in his yard. It was consumed by ivy. He had battled the ivy by weed killer, cutting off the roots, stripping the vines, ignoring it. But eventually the tree began to die. They had to cut down the tree. When they did, they found that the center of the tree had been taken over by the ivy, and over many years it had dragged all kinds of junk into the heart of the tree—including a tricycle.

Pride is like that ivy. It is the chief vice, and if unattended, it can take over our spiritual lives and drag all kinds of vices into our hearts. Corey described the sin of pride. It is self-referential, making ourselves the reference point instead of God being the legitimate reference point. Pride is competitive. It takes no pleasure in having something, only in having more than others. The prideful soul is empty—behind any accomplishments, there exists only darkness, like the ivy at the core of the tree.

Moving from pride to humility involves not thinking less of ourselves, but (as C. S. Lewis is attributed with), thinking of ourselves less. Humility is both a gift and a task. It is a gift from God in which a lesser love (love of self) is replaced by love of God. The best way to kill pride, argued Corey, is to meditate on the gospel. Put Jesus in the center of our heart, instead of our ivy

of self-love. In sin, we substitute ourselves for God. In grace, God substitutes himself for us (John Stott). Humility is also a task. We put on humility, Dallas Willard said, the gospel is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. It requires effort to build the habit of humility. When we start trying to build a habit, we are like a child trying to dress ourselves. Often, it ain't pretty. By the time we get to be a teen, we have the habit down. It takes time and practice.

How do we practice humility so that we can build that habit? (1) Worship deliberately. Keep God at the center. (2) Serve anonymously. "Everyone wants to change the world. No one wants to clean the toilets" (Don Coleman). Jesus washed a lot of feet. Can't we clean others' shoes? (3) (And brace yourself for the hard one) Accept humiliation (including criticisms and trials) willingly. (I knew there'd be a catch.) Corey told a bicycle story about a young woman blowing by him on a bike. Goaded by pride, he sped up. And ran into a ditch. (4) Practice self-reflection frequently. Face ourselves honestly, not competitively in pride. (I'm not as bad as a murderer or bank robber, so I must be okay.) Yes, there is a tension between self-reflection and self-focus. We have to find the point that is not too self-focused and not too oblivious to self, but (as Daryl called it, right-sized). (5) Get into a relationship with a loving person you trust to be honest with you in love. (6) Don't wait for perfection. Sometimes "ready, fire, aim" (Sam Walton's encouragement to act boldly) is better than "ready, aim, aim, aim,"

Karen Carr and Darlene Jerome (March 17)

Karen and Darlene are Christ Pres members, and we are blessed to have these great teachers who are with Barnabas International.

Karen and Darlene noted—as Corey had mentioned—that humility requires effort but is not about earning. Like Micah (McCreary) and the prophet Micah also noted, humility is intimately woven together with justice and mercy (recall Micah 6:8). In Matthew 11, Jesus invites us to come to him and he will give us rest. When we come to Jesus, we make a decision to rest from trying to earn approval, allow ourselves to be filled, and surrender. We must keep our focus right-sized (as Daryl mentioned). That is, we must know who God is and who we are. God invites us to humility, but, as Paul learned with his "thorn in the flesh," God often invites humility by way of a disruptive change.

Disruptive changes dislodge us from our comfort zone. They can be temptations, traumas, stress, illnesses, losses, failures, or any of thousands of changes that move us away from comfort. We have a choice when experiencing a disruptive change: we can resist it or we can embrace it (and learn from it). Just because we embrace it, that does not mean that we don't have some conversations with God in getting to the embrace. Embracing ends with us feeling yoked to Jesus, filled, not independent, trusting in God, resting in God.

But where do we start that journey to get into the embrace? We can start with our own circumstances, or we can start with a deep knowledge of a God who loves us, invites us, and leaves a choice up to us.

When we pray for humility, we often get as answer, a disruptive change. Will we accept humiliation willingly (as Corey suggested)? Or will we succumb to pride, characterized by anger, comparing with others, worrying about being unjustly used?

As Micah pointed out, humility is a journey. It is a journey from Good Friday, in which I feel crucified, to Easter Sunday. But it requires going through holy Saturday, a time of uncertainty, struggle, and effort as well as a time of surrender, allowing ourselves to be filled, and rest. We might fluctuate during that day of uncertainty, but we want to get to Easter, not remain at Good Friday or even Holy Saturday.

So, when we feel a time of disruptive change, can we experience it as a time not of unfair abuse and triggered resistance, but as an invitation to humility and ultimately rest?

What are indications that we are resisting God's invitation to humility? Here are some: comparing, blaming, defensiveness, stupidity, thick-headed, focus on our goal and frustration at not reaching them, persistently asking why, irritability, fear, anger, pride, entitlement, lack of forgiveness, fear of rejection, fear of missing out (FOMO), fear of what might happen, lack of trust, fear of not being known or heard, assuming the worst, and asking why me?

What are indications of embracing the call to humility? Here are some. What does Scripture say God is like (as opposed to my worries that God is unfair, uncaring, or not concerned about me), know what we are like, seek God's perspective, admit our faults, ask for forgiveness, acceptance, rejoice instead of complain, non-defensive, risk-taking, desire to listen to others, and letting God do the work.

Of the many characteristics of embracing the call to humility in a time of disruptive change, Karen and Darlene picked two. (1) Vulnerability. We need to be able to say I don't know and I need help. We need to be aware and to admit that we have reached our limit and can only depend on God. (2) Repentance. We also need to be able to say, I'm sorry and I was wrong.

Good news: whether we resist or embrace God's invitation to humility, God never stops inviting us.

Donnie Davis (March 24)

Donnie acknowledged that Daryl had provided a good summary of what the science of humility had discovered. But Donnie wanted to provide some things we DON'T know about humility. There are three points he wanted to cover (hats off to Kevin's three-point sermons!). The points are (1) What is one problem? (2) What is perhaps the biggest problem? (3) How then shall we live?

Point 1: What is one problem? Donnie quoted C. S. Lewis, saying that we often can adopt a churchy, smarmy, false humility. We put on humility as a cloak to hide our true selves. Donnie thought this can be a real problem for Christians, but it probably is not the main problem. We are

pretty good at recognizing when people are falsely humble. Humans want to be able to trust others, so subtle signs of false humility are picked up on, even if we cannot articulate how we did it. The second part of the C. S. Lewis quote said this, if we met a truly humble person, we probably would not recognize the person was humble. We would just think the person was nice and cared a lot about us. Donnie thinks the (perish the thought) C. S. Lewis might be a little off on this (say it isn't so!!). But, again, although we might not be able to label the person as humble, we probably would know they were humble. Humility is a signal that the person is other-oriented (remember, Daryl and Corey both said this). C. S. Lewis also said that there are two things we need to consider. We need to recognize that we are proud (because we are, after all, fallen). Also, if we think we are not proud, that is a sure indication that we are proud indeed. Donnie said that we need to recognize our own pride and its opposite, humility (see Corey's talk). That ability to assess our humility is one indication from God that we need to change and become more humble.

How might we become more humble if we detect that we need to eschew pride and seek humility? This is a problem. If we have a problem in unforgiveness, we want to take care of it, so we seek an intervention to help. But, with humility, if we aren't humble, often we don't think we need to seek help in becoming more humble. (Think of an arrogant person: I am too good to need humility. Think of a person who is mired in self-consciousness, feeling worthless: The last thing I need is humility; I need a boost to my self-esteem. Both people are focused on the self and need humility. They are on the opposite side of the "right-size" of self-focus.)

"In fact," Donnie said, "we all have something to learn about humility, but we might each have a different thing to learn about humility."

Point 2: What does Donnie think the biggest problem with humility might be? In our culture, we have an inherent mistrust that humility is good for us. That is because, in US culture, we usually think that WE know best what is good for us. This can be a deep problem in our relationship with God. When things go poorly for us, we have head knowledge that "All things work together for good for those who know God and are called according to his purpose." But we don't see the long-game. We don't see how they will work out for our good. So, we only focus on the things we can see in the short term, and that looks like God doesn't really care and glib Scriptural advice to be humble does not seem good for us. So, we are tempted to take over and assume control, as if we know better than God. True, we don't construe it like that. But we go with our fear instead of trusting God. This, unfortunately is not a stance of humility, but rather of (okay it's a hard word, but) arrogance.

We know God is good. We know God is for us. But we don't feel it when things place our humility under strain. And we all too often go with our fears and need for control rather than our faith.

In Jesus' final week, he confronted injustice and the Sanhedrin labeled him arrogant! They were going to crucify him. He must have felt misunderstood. Importantly, in his journey in humility to

the cross, he reacted by strong negative emotion and also by wrestling with God, not by acceptance. He went to the Garden. He brought friends along for support. He wrestled with God and pleaded to take the cup from him. He got upset with his friends for not providing enough support and understanding. Importantly, he got to the place in his time of disruptive change (recall Karen and Darlene's talk) of embracing God's invitation to humility: "Not my will, but thine be done!" The point is that when our humility is challenged by life circumstances, we should not get down on ourselves because we, like (Philippians 2) Jesus, our model of humility, if we struggle. Importantly, it is not that we struggle but that we arrive in a good, humble place at the end of the struggle.

Point 3: How should we then live? What must we do to become more humble? (1) Cognitive psychology points out the 10,000 hour rule. We need to practice correctly for 10,000 hours to be an expert. (Perspective: At one hour a day of concentrated, and correct practice at being humble, we can expect to be an expert in 30 years!!!) (2) We must practice correctly under conditions of stress. If a baseball player is going to hit a 95 mile an hour fastball, he cannot do batting practice against a 10 year old's fastball. He has to practice under game conditions. So, Donnie urged us to think of things that strain our humility. Examples might be having people brag about us, being misunderstood, being treated unfairly, being told we are inferior, wrong, or stupid, being unfavorably compared to someone, having a loved one criticize us, etc. If we took one of those strains, and if we imagined how to cope with it humbly and did this each day, we would be practicing our batting against a major league pitcher. So, when a real test of our humility comes up, it isn't much of a step up to react humbly.

C. Analysis

My apologies to these excellent speakers, who gave of their time and their thought to help us become more humble Christians, because I am sure that I have misconstrued one or more points of each one of them.

I hope that you were able to listen to the talks of each of these very accomplished speakers who brought their wide range of knowledge and experiences (scientific, theological, preaching, administration, ministering to missionaries under disruptive change, simply living as Christians) to bear on our humility theme. We had an amazing range of perspectives represented in these five speakers. I'm sure that we each connected more with some speakers than with others, but the variety of perspectives is important. Like seeing an object with two eyes, we have a slightly different perspective with each eye and that gives us depth perception. Five eyes on the prize give a rich look at humility.

But the downside of hearing five different perspectives is we might not agree with everything. After all, we have our own Cristian living to draw on, too, and we have our own struggles that challenge our humility.

I urge you to think about the talks and see if you can come up with some themes that cut across the talks. I have done this below, but you might do well to think of what those themes might be BEFORE you read what I have seen. Then you'd have a perspective less likely to be tainted by my admittedly personal view. Here are the themes that I saw.

Themes

- When five committed Christians, trained in different disciplines with different life experiences come at a Christian virtue, there will be many common perceptions but some divergences.
- Christian humility begins with spiritual humility, which is humility in the face of God.
- Disruptive changes invite us to get to a place of humility. But as humans, we might fight it at first, and (like Jesus in the Garden), there is nothing wrong with fighting against it if we ultimately arrive at a place of trusting God.
- Even if we fail to arrive at that place of trust, God does not stop inviting us. Vulnerability and repentance are part of humility.
- Humility involves being right-sized in our self-focus. Not too much, but not oblivious to the self either.
- Humility involves serving others, which flows from Jesus as our example.
- Humility involves social behavior—acting modestly, but with a sincere modesty, not false modesty.
- In humility, we are teachable.
- I love Corey's picture of the tree whose insides were eaten up and crowded out by the ivy. It is a cautionary tale that urges us to seek to become more humble.
- Humility involves defeating pride, but that is only part of humility. Holding a newborn baby in our arms can fill us with humility—not because we are prideful, but because we are rightfully aware of both strengths and weaknesses and are other-oriented to help the child flourish. We should become aware of our humility (but not too aware), and we should pursue humility as part of our Christian formation of Christ in us (the hope of glory).
- Effort to put on humility, to practice it until it becomes a habit of the heart is part of the Christian life. It can go awry if we start feeling that we are earning God's approval, God's love, or others' approval and love. Effort is okay; earning is not.
- Don't expect a miracle transformation. Remember the 10,000-hour rule to become an expert in humility. Humility is a journey—not just a 10,000-hour journey, but a journey from Good Friday to Easter, but passing through Holy Saturday, which is a day of struggle, of victory and defeat, of uncertainty.
- Humility is tied up with other virtues. In this time of history, social justice is of great concern. Each Christian must rise to act Christianly in whatever time we are thrown into. You know, O humans in the 21st century, what the Lord requires of you. To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. It is not just a time for social justice, but it is a time of social division. God also desires of us that we be forgiving people—especially to those who have hurt and misunderstood us. I was

challenged deeply by Micah's call to pursue justice, be a wounded healer who is also a warrior healer.

- Fortunately, we have something that can aid with Christian humility that people who do not name Christ as savior do not have—the Holy Spirit within, leading us into truth. I personally think that this might shorten the 10,000-hour rule a bit, and I know it makes it less burdensome to practice humility when we know that God is at work in us.
- We can rest in knowing, as Daryl pointed out and others alluded to, that humility has temporal benefits. It provides social oil that greases social interactions, and it helps heal social hurts. Nice to know. We don't pursue humility for the benefits, but when we pursue God, it's nice to know that benefits do come along.