LESSON 9

FACING LIFE WITH HUMILITY

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

In this lesson we learn five definitions of humility.

OUTLINE

Being self-centered creatures, there is little in life we would not change to suit ourselves if we could. But there are more things in life we can't change than those we can. And in that truth is a recipe for wisdom through humility. Humility means being content when change is impossible.

I. **Humility Is Knowing What You Don't Know**

II. **Humility Is Living With What You Don't Like**

III. **Humility Is Accepting What You Can't Change**
   - A. Death
   - B. Distress
   - C. Deception
   - D. Defiance

IV. **Humility Is Enjoying What You Can't Explain**

V. **Humility Is Discovering What You Can't Discover**

OVERVIEW

One of my favorite players in the National Football League is Kurt Warner, who was a wonderfully talented quarterback who led the St. Louis Rams to the Super Bowl. He was named the Most Valuable Player of the league and of the Super Bowl—and the next thing you know he was sitting on the bench, not playing. He went through a period of not doing too well, got injured and, while he was recuperating, the back-up quarterback won his job. So he went from MVP to holding a clipboard and taking notes on the sidelines. Talk about a humbling transition!

Life is a process of learning humility. Even our children keep us humble. One night my wife and I were enjoying a quiet evening at home playing one of our favorite board games. Our oldest daughter called and asked what we were doing. I told her we were playing the game. "Just the two of you? That's cute!" she said. After she hung up, I said to my wife, "I wonder what they think we do? As if, now that they're gone, we just stopped living?" Children can keep you humble.

The actor Tom Selleck wrote, "Whenever I get full of myself, I remember the nice couple who approached me with a camera on a street in Honolulu one day. When I struck a pose for them, the man said, 'No, no. We want you to take a picture of us.'" Even strangers can keep us humble.

In the eighth chapter of Ecclesiastes, Solomon reminds us about things that make us humble.

Humility Is Knowing What You Don't Know

Throughout the Bible, we are warned against being wise in our own eyes. Solomon says that a wise man has a shining face, a glowing countenance. A wise man knows some things and some things he doesn't. But "the sternness of his face is changed" because he is not uptight about what he doesn't know. He is wise, and his wisdom makes him humble.

In 1 Corinthians 8:2, Paul wrote, "And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." Knowledge is a never-ending pursuit, an exercise in humility as we discover what we don't know. A few decades ago researchers told us that the world's knowledge changed every 38 years. That is, the knowledge you could acquire in 38 years was equal to all the

knowledge that existed before. Today the knowledge of the world changes every single year! Today, more knowledge is accumulated in one year than in all the years that have ever been. And it will keep growing every year.

My grandchildren understand modern electrical gadgets better than I do because they have grown up with them. Knowledge is exploding—and it's getting harder and harder to keep up. It is a wise and humble man who knows what he doesn't know, what he can't know, and what he doesn't need to know—because you can't know it all. Anyone who thinks he "knows it all" is already suffering from pride.

Humility Is Living With What You Don't Like

Much of our daily lives is controlled by the dictates and desires, not to mention needs, of others—whether the government or a family member. Daily we have to remind ourselves that we'll be required to do things we'd rather not do. Solomon gives us an illustration in verses 2-7 of the fact that we all have to live with what we don't like.

Being in a situation you can't control is humbling. A citizen who is under the power and control of a king is humbled by having to obey. But Solomon says, "Keep the king's commandment for the sake of your oath to God" (verse 2)—not because you like the king. Even when you don't like what you're being made to do, do it out of loyalty to God. This is the essence of Paul's message to the church in Rome about submitting to civil authorities (Romans 13:1-2). As long as what we're being asked to do doesn't disobey the commands of God, we are to do it.

The New Living Translation of Ecclesiastes 8:2-7 is very helpful:

> Obey the king since you vowed to God that you would. Don't try to avoid doing your duty, and don't stand with those who plot evil, for the king can do whatever he wants. His command is backed by great power. No one can resist or question it. Those who obey him will not be punished. Those who are wise will find a time and a way to do what is right, for there is a time and a way for everything, even when a person is in trouble. Indeed, how can people avoid what they don't know is going to happen?

Humility is knowing what you don't know and living with what you don't like.

Humility Is Accepting What You Can't Change

This point follows the previous point: If we're doing something we don't like, we can't change it because we're not in control. It's obvious that if we could change it, we would! So much of life is uncontrollable. As soon as we think we've got a handle on things . . . they're out of control again. Solomon says there are four things you will never be able to control.

Death

We often hear that there are two things we'll never change: death and taxes. In fact, taxes can and do change, but death doesn't. It is the great leveler, the great symbol of just how little control over "things" we actually have.

What we don't know about death is when it will find us. Solomon speaks of it in the context of war, a timely way for us to think of it with so many of our armed forces serving in high-tension points in the world. But soldiers aren't the only ones living on the edge—death can find any one of us at any time. And we cannot elude it.

There is a legend of a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to the market. The servant returned home, ashen and shaken. He told his master he had just encountered Death at the market and begged for use of his master's horse to flee to Samarra to hide. The merchant agreed and the servant fled. Later, when the merchant was in the market, he saw Death and asked why she had threatened his servant that morning. Death replied that she had not meant to startle the servant. She was surprised to see him in the market in Baghdad since she had an appointment to meet him that night in Samarra.

When it comes to death, "you can run, but you can't hide." Some people who can afford it are now trying to thwart death by paying large sums to have themselves, or just their heads, frozen, believing that one day science will make it possible for their lives to be returned to them. It's a waste of money, for it is appointed unto man once to die and then comes the judgment (Hebrews 9:27). Death is a reality of life that we have no control over, and wisdom embraces that fact.

Distress

Solomon says, "There is a time in which one man rules over another to his own hurt." We will all be disappointed and hurt by others—and sometimes by those we trust the most. That's how we learn to keep our expectations focused on the Lord who never disappoints, and not on people. The wise man is one who assesses his life and decides what he can change, what hurt he can prevent, and what he can control—and what he can't. Everyone will suffer distress in this life. That's just the way it is. The answer is not vengeance—it is humility borne out of wisdom.

Deception

Solomon comments about the funeral of a man who had frequented the temple, but who had lived an ungodly life. He had deceived the people who knew him, and they eulogized him in grand fashion. All this while the godly people of the city were ignored and forgotten. "This also is vanity," Solomon says (verse 10).

This even happens today. We see on television coverage of the death of a public figure of some sort who everyone knows was a scoundrel. Yet he is heralded as a passing saint. Meanwhile, good people, doing noble work, labor in obscurity. There is a great deal of deception in this world which you and I cannot change.

Defiance

Throughout all sectors of society we see people shaking their fists in the face of authorities—ultimately in the face of God. Solomon says because people do not experience judgment for their sins, they think nothing is going to happen; and they defiantly continue in their rebellious ways. What they forget is that God is the ultimate judge. Whether human authorities make them pay or not, God will. And He doesn't work on our timetable. It is humbling to have to pay a speeding ticket when people doing much worse are getting away with it. But wisdom will leave ultimate judgment to God.

Humility Is Enjoying What You Can't Explain

The fourth characteristic of humility is enjoying what you can't explain. For the fourth time, Solomon reminds us that it is our privilege to "eat, drink, and be merry" in this life. This seems odd coming on the heels of death, distress, deception, and defiance, but that's the whole point. We can't control or change any of those

things, so don't get caught up in trying to do the impossible. Focus on what you can control: the choice to enjoy the life Almighty God has given you as His gift.

God has not called us to forfeit the joy of life as a result of despondency over things we can't explain and can't change. We don't eat, drink, and pursue merriment like the world without a thought of tomorrow. We eat, drink, and pursue merriment out of gratitude to the God who gives us that privilege in the midst of a world that He controls.

As Christians, we don't sit around and mope over things we can't control and can't change. We count each day as precious and live it to its fullest, thanking God all the while for the opportunity.

Humility Is Discovering What You Can't Discover

Here are Solomon's final words about humility: "Then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labors to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it."

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in his famous *Pensées* this statement. Listen carefully to what he said:

> If there were no obscurity, man would not feel his corruption; if there were no light, man could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God.

Did you get that? "If there were no obscurity, man would not feel his corruption." If we could know all about God and this world, we wouldn't have any sense of our own shortcomings or sinfulness. God has concealed things on purpose in order that we might know His greatness and our limitations, in order that we might be forced to seek after Him to discover what we don't know. But when we reach the limits of our discovery at any given moment, if we are humble, we will rest. We will recognize the limitations He has put in place and be willing to stop and take up the search another day. The discovery of God and His ways in this world is a never-ending quest. He is infinite and we are finite. Wisdom and

humility acknowledge the gap that exists between Him and us and doesn't try to close it beyond what He allows.

Think of the gap that would exist if God had not chosen to close it as much as He did by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. He became flesh and dwelt among us, allowing us to behold the glory of God among men, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). The apostle Paul recounts in detail how Christ "made Himself of no reputation . . . and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

Have you closed the gap between yourself and God, crossing over via the bridge named Jesus? Imitating the humility of Jesus is the first step in discovering God.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 8:1.
   a. Have you ever had a humbling experience in your life that you learned from?

   b. Did your behavior change because of that experience? How did it change you?

   c. How can wisdom change our perspective on knowledge?

   d. Do you ever act like a "know-it-all"? What is the harm in this attitude? Does anyone actually know it all?

2. Read Ecclesiastes 8:2-7.
   a. What are things the Lord commands you to do which you don't like doing? Do you ever consciously disobey Him?

   b. Besides the fact that He is God and we should always follow His will, why else should we do as the Lord says?

3. Read Ecclesiastes 8:8-14.
   a. What do you struggle with giving up control of in your life?

   b. How can you learn to surrender the future of these things to God?

   c. What is your reaction when something major in life doesn't go your way? Is this reaction biblical?

4. List and describe the five characteristics of humility described in this lesson. How can you adopt each of these characteristics into your life?
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5. Based on what was discussed in this lesson, and in this chapter of Ecclesiastes, would you say you are living a wisdom-filled life? In other words, are you responding to unforeseen situations in your life in a biblical manner?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 8:1-17. What are five aspects of humility discussed in the lesson?

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   a. Are any of you guilty of pride by not modeling these traits in your lives?

   b. Which do you struggle with the most?

   c. How can we each take all of these attitudes and adopt them into our lives?

2. Reread Ecclesiastes 8:8-14.

   a. What four things does Solomon say we will never be able to control?

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b. Have any of you struggled with giving up control of situations that involve these things?

c. Why can surrendering control of our lives be difficult?

d. What is a good way to practice giving up the need for control over the things we can't control?

e. How can we learn to have biblical responses to things in life not going the way we want them to?

3. Based on what was discussed in this lesson, and in this chapter of Ecclesiastes, would you say each of you are living a wisdom-filled life? Share if you feel comfortable.

DID YOU KNOW?

Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the most important passages of theology in the New Testament, specifically the theology of the person of Christ (the doctrine of Christology). Theologians call this passage the Kenosis passage, referring to the Greek verb *kenoo,* "to empty." In verse 7, Paul says Christ "emptied Himself" (NASB) and took on the form of a bond servant. Discussion throughout Church history has centered around this "emptying." Of what did Christ empty Himself? Deity? The right to exercise the prerogatives of Deity on earth? The NKJV translates it well: "[He] made Himself of no reputation."