TEACHING CHILDREN

humility

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

Colossians 3:12
Part 1:
What is Humility?

According to our conference agenda the subject of this assignment is “Teaching Children God-pleasing Humility, Versus Societal God-less Pride.” I have shortened the title with the intention of narrowing the scope of the paper. Hopefully, this will not curtail our discussion of this important issue.

Our dictionaries tell us that the word “humble” comes from the Latin humilis, meaning “low, from the earth.” Therefore, the humble are “not proud, haughty,” or “pretentious.” We speak of humble people, humble apologies, humble homes, etc. While “humility,” when ascribed to a person, is one of the fullest of virtues, it bespeaks a very special emptiness of self. Everyone knows something about humility. But who can find it in himself? And how often is “everyone” wrong when he says: “Now there goes a humble person!” or “He is a proud man!”?

Martin Luther was considered to be a proud and arrogant monk by his enemies in the Roman Catholic Church of his day. But those of us who have read his commentary on Galatians, perhaps his greatest work (after his translation of the Bible), would readily agree with the comment made recently by one of the laymen in my congregation: “Galatians shows how humble Luther was.” It is the opinion of this writer that Martin Luther was indeed a great, yet humble man, because, by the grace of God, he understood the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, not only as a chief teaching of Holy Scripture, or as an abstract principle of theology; but in the depths of his own soul.

HUMILITY’S FLOWER – FAIR AND FRAGILE!

- “Humility! The sweetest, loveliest flower
  That bloom’d in Paradise, and the first that died,
  Has rarely blossomed since on mortal soil.
  It is so frail, so delicate a thing,
‘Tis gone if it but look upon itself; 
And she who ventures to esteem it hers, 
Proves by that single thought she has it not.”

[– C. Fry (?), quoted in Thirty Thousand Thoughts, Vol. III, 9616]

- “You must seek out the violet; it does not, like the poppy, thrust itself upon your notice. The moment humility tells you ‘I am here,’ there is an end to it.” [Thirty Thousand Thoughts, Vol. III, 9615]

- “Humility is so tender and so precious that it cannot bear to look at its own face.” [from Luther’s exposition of Luke 1:48, quoted in What Luther Says, E. Plass, 2084]

But humility does have a face.

**HUMILITY’S “FACE”**

If we could “see” humility, who would it look like? For example, when we think of athleticism the elders among us may see the face of Jim Thorpe, while the younger set might picture Michael Jordan or Michael Vick. To the informed Christian, thoughts of reformation might bring to mind the face of Martin Luther as painted by Lucas Cranach; betrayal, Judas; adultery, David, and so on. What is humility’s “face”? Is it not the face of our Lord Jesus, Who “humbled Himself unto death, even the death of the cross”?

So Luther writes: “

. . . the truly humble look not to the result of humility but with a simple heart regard things of low degree and gladly associate with them. It never enters their minds that they are humble. Here the water flows from the well here it follows naturally and as a matter of course that they will cultivate humble conduct, humble words, places, faces, and clothing, and so far as possible, will shun great and lofty things.

“Thus David says in Ps. 131:1: ‘O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high.” And Job 22:29 says: ‘He who has been humbled shall be in glory; and he who bows down his eyes shall be saved.’ Hence honors always come unexpectedly to
them, and their exaltation is a surprise; for they have been content with their lowly station and have never aspired to the heights. But the false humble wonder why their glory and honor are so long in coming; their secret false pride is not content with the low estate but aspires in secret ever higher and higher.

True humility, therefore, never knows that it is humble, as I have said; for if it knew, it would turn proud from contemplation of so fine a virtue.” [from Luther’s exposition of Luke 1:48, quoted in What Luther Says, E. Plass, 2083]

Surely the face of humility is our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, like David, “the man after God’s own heart,” did not lift up his own heart or raise his eyes too high. For it is Jesus “Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it something to be held on to, but made Himself of no reputation – taking the form of a servant when he came in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” (Phil. 2:6-8, transl. v.f.) Surely Jesus is the face into which we are to gaze as our God transforms us into the image of His beloved Son (2Cor. 3:18)

**HUMILITY’S FOUNDATION**

True humility is a virtue. God is the Author and the Source of every virtue, and everything that can be called a “virtue” is founded on The Truth of God. Luther writes:

“A man cannot be thoroughly humbled until he gets to know that his salvation lies utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will, and works, and depends absolutely on the pleasure, counsel, will, and work of Another, namely, God alone. For if man, convinced that he is able to do the least thing toward his own salvation, retains confidence in himself and does not utterly despair of himself, he is not humble before God.” [What Luther Says, E. Plass, 2087]

True humility knows the truth about self and the truth about God, because it is founded on God’s truth about man’s total depravity and unworthiness, on the one hand, and God’s forgiveness and grace, on the other.
HUMILITY’S FAITH

We have said that humility has a “face.” But true humility isn’t interested in saving face or putting on a face. True humility does not see its self, because its self is too small. It does not swagger when it walks among the rich, the powerful or the honored persons of the world; it rather trembles, blinks, and bows.

But neither does true, God-given humility cower before the world. It has confidence because it believes more than it sees, and prefers to trust God’s Word above human reason or will. Humility’s faith will not pray, “My will be done,” no matter how great the desire; but “Thy will be done.”

Indeed, true humility must trust in God, even though the flesh it inhabits may falter at times, as in the case of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Humility bows to God’s Word rather than boasting against it, does not harden the heart against the “hard sayings” of God, but encourages the acceptance of the same, preferring to let God be God.

HUMILITY’S FUTURE

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18 – ESV); but “The meek shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5, cf. Ps. 37:11). “For the LORD takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the humble with salvation.” (Psalm 149:4)
Part II:

Why must we teach humility?

- *Humility must be taught because our children are not born with it.*

  Children are not born with a good “work ethic,” math, reading or computer skills. Loving parents teach these things so that their offspring may be prepared to make a living. Children are not born with good manners and other social skills; devoted parents teach these behavioral traits because they recognize their importance in relating to the human community in which their children must “get along.”

  Further, while genetics and natural birth, by the blessing of God, may determine a child’s intellectual proclivity for math, languages, athletic prowess, and the like, everyone born of man and woman is “conceived and born in sin.” Inherited sin does not know humility, only pride and self-will.

  Because humility is not a natural or inherited trait. It is the hardest of virtues to possess, since it requires a continual uprooting of “self” from the human heart. While it is an easy thing to find someone to look down on because our fleshly nature delights in the exercise, looking down on ourselves is difficult because of the pain it brings to our stiff necks!

- *The world generally opposes humility and is unable and unwilling to teach it.*

  We are raising our children in a culture where a false sense of self-importance is encouraged by everything around us. For many years the emphasis in educating children has shifted from inculcating them with reading and writing skills, the facts of history, science, and mathematics, to encouraging the self-expression of the students. The old adage, supported by Luther that “children should be seen, and not heard,” has been turned on its ear!
In our “free” country our children are increasingly encouraged to make great noise about their rights and dignities, even to the point of casting off the authority of their parents, at an ever younger age. The young are excited to offer their opinions on all kinds of issues about which they know very little or nothing at all! The impression is given that the loud and the proud will inherit the earth, not the meek!

Then too: Our children already have much to learn in their youth just to prepare them to get along in this work-a-day-world. They will have to compete in order to make a living; but how does teaching humility help them compete? In order to “get ahead” in this world and climb the ladder of success a person must be able to step up, not down; he must put himself forward and prefer himself before others. He must have a good sense of “self-esteem.” “How can a man love his wife unless he loves himself first?” We hear about how “frail” the male ego can be. The implication often is that a man must have his ego “stroked” sufficiently in order for him to be an emotionally strong and confident person.

So the world believes and teaches in its schools, in its homes, and in the work-place. We know from the Scriptures, from the life of Christ, and from our own experience that the world generally has no regard for the humble man. However, the Scriptures teach us that “God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble.” Therefore, our response to all this ought to be that, as Christian parents our greatest concern is not how well our children “compete” in the world, but where they “stand” with God. We ought to have every confidence that our God Who loves our children more than we do, will also bless their lives and labors in this world, as they “seek His righteousness first.”

- **Humility must be taught because it is essential to salvation and praised by our God more than any other Christian virtue, as indicated in many passages of Holy Scripture.**

  Psalm 149:4: “For the LORD takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the humble with salvation.
  Prov 3:34: “Surely he scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.”
  Prov. 15:33: “The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom, and before honor is humility.”
Prov. 16:19: “Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.” (cf. Prov. 18:12)

Isaiah 66:2: “For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,’ says the LORD. ‘But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.’”

Zeph. 3:12: “I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.”

Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

It is good to know the truth about how God works, since the world misrepresents Him, assuming that “might makes right” and the great and mighty must always have God’s blessing. Consider:

Luke 1:48-52 where we are told that God “regarded the lowly state” of Mary; . . . “He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.”

Matt. 5:3 and 5: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; . . . “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.”

Matt. 23:12 (Lk. 14:11): “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Eph. 4:1-2: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, . . . .”

Phil. 2:3-8: “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. . . . Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,” and so on, as quoted above (Humility’s face)

Col. 3:12: “Therefore as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering.”

James 4:6: “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

1Peter 5:5-6: “Likewise you young people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”
Humility must be taught because it is the beginning and the end of saving faith.

“Except you become converted, like a little child, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 18:3) So our Lord put His proud, self-righteous disciples in their place for their spiritual well-being. As evidenced by their bickering on the eve of His death, Christ’s followers needed and need to be “re-converted” and “reduced” to the humble attitude of a dependent child again and again, lest we become too big for our britches!

When we bring our children to the cleansing, faith-creating waters of Baptism, we confess that they are conceived and born in sin, and without the grace of God would perish forever. We rejoice that the faith worked in them by the Spirit through infant baptism is a simple, “childlike” trust in their Savior. As the human reason is developed in the young child and self-awareness is magnified by natural pride, the “childlike” faith which brings to heaven is viciously attacked. We know that this will be the case with every baptized child of God. So we pray at the Baptism that God will keep them in their baptismal grace, and continue to look on them with His favor. And so we also say:

Humility must be taught so that our children learn to bow before God’s Word.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Psalm 19:9) In other words: wisdom is found by humility. As the poet wrote: “Wisdom is oftentimes nearer when we stoop than when we soar.” [William Wordsworth]

We are mindful, I think, of the Lord’s words in Isaiah 66:2: “On this one I look . . . who trembles at My Word.” It is vital for all the little ones we bring to Jesus, that they be taught from their youth to humbly “tremble” at the word of their Savior God. For as long as His believing children remain “little” in their own eyes, they will be “great” in the eyes of God.

“The Holy Scriptures call for a humble reader, who is reverent and trembles at the words (sermones) of God, one who is always saying: Teach me, teach me, teach me! The Spirit resists the proud.” [Luther, What Luther Says, E. Plass, 2102]
Humility must be taught because without it many prayers will not rise toward heaven or be heard by God.

Pride is a bear on the back of the self-righteous who remains “under” the oppressive burden of the Law. Likewise, pride is a heavy burden on the heart and life of one who boasts that he is “a self-made man,” because he is under constant pressure to “make” himself somebody, and to build little tributes to himself.

Humility, on the other hand is a light and airy thing that finds quick relief from sin, suffering, and the anxieties of life. It says, “God is my righteousness,” “my Help,” “my Rock,” “my portion,” “my life,” “My light,” etc. The prayer of the humble believer rises quickly and directly to the throne of Him Who “draws near to the contrite.” The lower the believing heart descends, the higher the prayer ascends. “The Christian enters heaven with prayer,” as the hymn writer put it.

Humility is the first note of faith’s saving song.

It is our hope that the above (a review for many) has brought the reader to an inescapable conclusion: The need to teach humility to our children is not about childhood “development,” or “raising good kids;” It’s really a matter of life or death, for without humility no one can have faith’s fellowship with God in this life or in eternity. We close this section with Luther’s emphasis on the need for humility to have fellowship with God. Note how he couples humility with saving faith, showing that the later begins with the former. In commenting on Romans 3:7, He writes:

“Humility and faith are necessary. These alone are called for and established by these words, so that we become entirely nothing, emptied of everything. And say with the prophet:

‘Against thee, Thee only, have I sinned . . . that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest’ (Ps. 51:4) To thee I am foolish and weak, so that Thou mayest be wise and strong in Thy words. Indeed, this lesson is taught by everything that has been created.

Only those who are sick need a doctor (Matt.9:12);
Only the sheep that is lost is looked for (Luke 15:4);
Only the poor man is enriched; only the weak man is made strong; only the humble man is exalted (Luke 1:52);
Only what is empty is filled; only what is scattered can be assembled.

The truth is, as the philosophers say: Matter cannot be given a form unless it
previously was formless or its earlier form has been put off. . . .

If, then, this is the language of everything that has been created, it is impossible to fill him who is full of his own righteousness with the righteousness of God. God satisfies none but the hungry and the thirsty. Therefore he who is satisfied with his own truth and wisdom cannot contain the truth and wisdom of God. These can only be received in a vacuum and an empty space.

Therefore let us say to God:

Oh, how gladly are we empty, so that Thou mayest be full in us!
Gladly am I weak, so that Thy strength may dwell in me!
Gladly am I a sinner, so that Thou mayest be justified in me!
Gladly am I foolish, so that Thou mayest be my Wisdom!
Gladly am I unrighteous, so that Thou mayest be my righteousness!

See, this is what is meant by: “Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned . . . that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest” (Ps. 51:4)

[From Luther’s lectures on Romans (1515-16) *What Luther Says*, E. Plass, 2097]

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” *(Prov. 22:6)* Does not this admonition to parents encourage the teaching of humility, so precious to Christ and so essential to the salvation of His children at any and all ages?

- *Although teaching humility is no easy task, it is worth the effort because it is necessary for salvation . . . *

After all we have said in describing and praising the virtue of humility, some may be thinking that teaching humility is a very difficult task. But parents need to consider how much time, effort, and money is spent to teach their children how to excel as students, athletes, or musicians. Yet which of these is more highly regarded by our God in heaven than *humility*?

If human teachers and coaches are able to train our students, athletes, and musicians, using human resources and instruments, how difficult is it for God to teach *humility* to all His children by means of His own perfect and powerful resources, equipment, and instruments? And while not every child needs to be a student, an athlete, and a musician, to live before God in this world, every child does need *humility* in this life in order to live before Him in heaven, as the Bible teaches.
Part III:

How do we teach humility to our children?

- Teaching humility is much more than teaching “about” humility.

  People generally have an adequate idea of what humility looks like. They may be able to describe it in terms of its manifestations. Meekness, gentleness, mercy, an obvious concern for the need of others before self, even self-deprecation— all such behavior looks like humility. We may point them out to our children, along with examples of how famous people like Jesus and Moses have demonstrated humility. In this way it is possible to teach about humility.

  Indeed, for those who think more of the “rights” of children than what is right for them, who are loathe to impose any virtue upon children, it may be that teaching children about humility somehow seems less oppressive and threatening to them. But, we know from Holy Scripture and from our own Christian experience that expressions of humility in the lives of others, by themselves, do not impress humility on the human heart. Teaching about humility does not a humble person make! Not human psychology, but God alone, makes a humble heart, and this He works by the means He has appointed.

- While we may teach humility, we cannot make anyone humble.

  We know that God has the powerful “resources” from heaven to “put down the mighty” from whatever “throne” or pedestal on which they are seated. (Luke 1:52) We recall how He humbled that boastful ruler of the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar; chased Moses into Midian to learn meekness and struck his proud sister with leprosy. We remember how God used a servant girl to silence the “crowing” of proud Peter.

  At this point we make careful distinction between teaching humility and “making” humble. Christian’s can only teach humility. They cannot “make” anyone humble; but God both teaches humility and makes humble. True humility is not a badge we can pin on our children after they have submitted themselves to a code of conduct we have prescribed for them. True humility is only
found in those who are true Christ-believers and fruit-bearing branches of this Life-giving Vine (John 15:1-8). Humility is not some abstract formula which may be memorized and applied like a geometric theorem, but a concrete “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:23).

- **The Spirit of God begins His teaching by the grace imparted in infant Baptism.**

  Since the Spirit of God first goes to work in our children in their Baptism, it is then that He first creates humility in their hearts. Those “little ones” (Greek = “infants”) who “believe on” Him, have been brought to a humble realization of their sins and their complete dependence upon the grace and forgiveness of their Savior God. Although they cannot express it, humility has been impressed upon their hearts, as evidenced by our Lord’s use of such a little “convert” to rebuke the self-righteous pride of His grown up disciples. (Matthew 18)

- **Christian parents are God’s representatives to teach humility by the proper application of Law and Gospel.**

  Lest His little ones grow up and grow away from their humble dependence upon Christ and His Word, our Lord places a powerful teaching aid in the hands of Christian parents: His Word – *The Law and the Gospel.* “You fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.” (Eph. 6:4) Luther declared that the man who is able to rightly distinguish and properly apply the Law and the Gospel is a true Doctor of Theology. If this is true – and experience teaches that it is – then every good Christian parent must also qualify as a Doctor of Theology. Nothing is more helpful for teaching true humility than the proper application of Law and Gospel.

  By the time our children have reached confirmation age they know Psalm 51:10 from memory: “Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right (steadfast) spirit within me.” But we should not assume that they understand the two most important words of this verse – the verbs create and renew. The first is the word used in Genesis chapter 1 to speak of God’s making something out of nothing; and the second is the O.T. word for restoring a building that has been totally leveled to the ground.

  Our children must be taught that in and of themselves they are nothing but sinners, deserving of eternal damnation. If our children do not learn to pray to God from a clear and heartfelt sense of their own spiritual “nothingness” before God, how will they “draw near to Him” so that they
may “find help in time of need”? And how long will God endure a heart that, because of self-righteous pride, grows far from Him?

Pharisees do not appear suddenly. Unchecked, the seeds of Phariseeism grow in the infant heart to threaten baptismal faith and eternal salvation! Many parents are quick to remove a sliver from their child’s hand, but shrink from applying the Law to remove self-righteousness from their child’s heart.

Therefore, it is most important to hold the sins of our children before their eyes, and not permit them to make excuse for them or cover them up in any way. A vital parental responsibility is to lead children to appreciate the forgiving “grace” of God toward them. The more often they are moved to humbly repent of their sins and to be glad for the grace they have received in Christ, the more readily they will humbly apologize when they have sinned against others. So our Lord would have parents teach their children the meaning of the Fifth Petition: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

On the other hand, while our children need to know that they are nothing but sinners before the holy God, our God does not regard them as nothing. Rather with the eyes of grace he looks upon them as purchased possessions, dearly bought by the blood of His own Son, and as His own adopted children “through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26) Practically, this means, among other things, that Christian parents are not to be keen on punishing their children or constantly putting them down to make their own lives easier or so that they may boast that their children are the best behaved.

Since parents are God’s representatives for the sake of the children, Christian parents should not strive to break their children off, but to bend them so that they are always directed toward the Son, their Savior. For “a bruised reed He will not break, and the smoking flax He will not quench.” (Is. 42:3) This is a function of the proper teaching of the Law and the Gospel — the Law to bring low and destroy, and the Gospel to lift up and recreate by the pronouncement of forgiveness.

Surely the proper ministration of the Law and the Gospel to our children is one of the most important, yet poorly understood responsibilities of Christian parenting; and an area where secular child psychologists and educators are unable to help. Are we, as ministers of Christ, and teachers of the Law and Gospel, doing all that we can for our parents in this regard?
Humility is taught when parents keep their children in the place God has assigned them.

God gave children to parents so that the parents might “bring up” their children “in the nurture and training of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4), not so that the children might tell their parents what to do! This is a common failing in our upside-down culture. Children are born with the fleshly desire to get what they want, when they want it. While they may begin by asking, they will quickly learn to demand what they want.

Generally, parents should say “No” more often than they say “Yes,” and not be afraid to punish their young children corporally either. While the potter is still actively working his clay, he may take a pinch or a wack here and there with finger or chisel to shape his work the way he wants it; but once the aging process or the “firing” begin to take place, it may be too late to pinch and wack. Parents are the heavenly Potter’s “fingers” and “hands” to shape their children. As such they need to prod, pinch, and wack by word and “rod” in order to teach the child that he/she is not the boss of the house.

Parents need to know their God-assigned place, and then keep their children in their God-assigned place, so that their children may be brought up according to God’s will and have a place with Him. A relative of mine, an only child, hardly heard the word “No!” as he was growing up. Whatever he wanted he got. It wasn’t long before his parents were giving in to his out-of-place demands.

By the time he was a teenager – too late – his parents grew tired of these demands. One day when his mother refused to give her sixteen-year-old the keys to the car, he kicked her. The boy, now a man, was immediately knocked to the floor by his adult cousin and told never to strike his mother again. But the damage had been done by his permissive parents. He never grew to respect and honor his parents because he never learned his place from parents who knew their place.

Children should be taught to obey their parents and superiors, not because “might makes right,” or because one’s superiors are always “right,” but because “this is right” according to the will of God.

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” (Eph. 6:1) It is God who has placed a child’s parents over him for his own spiritual and physical well-being. As soon as they are able to understand, children should be made aware that their parents stand in the place of their
almighty Creator and Savior by His own order and design. When they obey their parents “in the Lord” they are obeying the Lord.

As indicated in the previous section, parents also need to remember their rightful, God-given place, so that they feel “secure” in demanding the obedience of their children, and do so with consistency. If parents remember that God Himself has declared the obedience of children to be “right,” then neither will they feel personally “threatened” when a child is disobedient or questions their decisions. When a Father answers the inevitable “Why?” with a loud, defensive, “Because I told you so!” he is not necessarily teaching humility. Rather than quickly putting his child in his place with the short answer, he may do better by explaining with a softer voice that God has made him a father for the sake of his children, and it is his place to make decisions for the sake of his children, whether they agree with those decisions or not.

We do not say that there is no place for the shout or yell in Christian parenting. However, just because the parent is in a position of authority, given by God, or just because he or she is bigger and stronger than the child, the parent is better able to exemplify humility by a quiet answer, rather than always shouting or threatening the child. “Submit yourselves to one another in the fear of God,” Paul exhorts in Ephesians 5:21. Then follows his encouragement and command regarding every human relationship – that all are to put themselves under one another.

When parents try to speak to their children and correct them in a kind and gentle manner they are teaching what humility is. For they are submitting themselves to their children by not “acting out” on the basis of their God-given “right” as parents, or the physical “might” they may possess.

- In this connection, we must keep in mind as we are rearing our children that it is an easy thing for those who exercise authority to crush a child’s spirit, which only makes him timid, not humble.

Children are different, one child to the next. Who has not seen the way God trains the very blessed parents to deal with all types? When the first child demonstrates a quiet and cuddly sweetness, the parents say, “This parent-thing is not so bad!” Then God sends those parents a loud and lively child, a “disturber of the peace.” Certainly the “spunky tadpole” must be reigned in, lest unbridled chaos run away with the home! However, it is also true that what our world desperately needs more of is not mice, but Christian men. The last thing we need are braggarts and
bullies who consistently cause their children to cower in a corner.

Luther says it well:
“. . . Children are . . . to be chastised in love; but parents are not to vent their furious temper on them, unconcerned about the way to correct the error of their children. For when the spirit has been cowed, one is of no use for anything and despairs of everything. And, what is worse, this timidity, implanted during the tender years, can almost never thereafter be eradicated. For since they have learned to be frightened at every word of their parents, they are subsequently afraid of even a rustling leaf of a tree. . . . some parents are satisfied if only their children are timid. But this is very harmful for later life.” (What Luther Says, E. Plass, 412)

- **We teach children humility when we teach them respect for others, especially their elders**

“Rise up before the hoary head!” (Lev. 19:32) “Likewise, you young people, submit yourselves to your elders, . . . for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (1Pet. 5:5-6) Isn’t it a wonderful thing to watch an infant “grow” into its head, and to see that God meant that little body and that big head to go together? How about the softness of the baby’s skin and the beautiful little mouth that makes exactly the same ‘baby sounds” that everyone else’s babies make? Yet, this is our child, an above average kid, as all our real friends attest! “What a vocabulary,” we encourage them to admit. “Isn’t that sweet?” “She’s learning to speak in sentences!” “I can’t believe he said that!” – we hear our children say. Then it happens . . .

The three-year-old begins to shake his head at his parents and wag his tongue in defiance – mouthing evidence that another little child has been “born of the flesh,” and is “flesh.” This is the beginning of disrespect for authority. Now the real challenge of Christian parenting begins! For if the child is permitted to disrespect the word and command of his parent, he will grow up to curse and dishonor his parents and disrespect every authority. This is not humility!

Sassy or defiant words must be promptly and firmly corrected in the very young, not with words of reason or with a frown, but with a slap on the posterior, or a “rod” of some kind! (Prov. 13:24, 29:15, etc.) In the “old” days a taste of soap was used in such instances, and it worked! There are other effective methods to properly and safely teach the very young to respect their parents. But the key is to nip this arrogant breakout in the bud before it bursts into the ugliest of flowers! For
“the eye that mocks his father, and despises to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it.”  (Prov. 30:17)

Although we may think that children grow up too fast, they don’t really spring into adulthood. They “feel their way.” As they reach for their maturity, they will overreach at times and insult their parents, often without realizing it. As a young teenager, I teased my father about his incorrect use of the pronouns “them” and “those.” He looked me in the eyes and asked: “Do you understand me when I speak?” “I’m sorry.” I said. – A lesson in humility properly taught.

Recently, one pastor reminded the children of his congregation that they should not mock elders for their relative illiteracy in the area of communications and computer technology, especially if their elders are teaching them the Word of God. This was a lesson in humility. Many similar lessons may be taught to children, who are encouraged by our corrupt culture to disrespect those in authority for a host of reasons! If we are to “respect” our children for who they are, not what they can do, how much more should the children respect those whom God has placed over them?

The architecture of the homes in the South, especially the old mansions with their great porches, is impressive. But more impressive is the politeness of the children that grow up in many of those homes. The long-held family tradition is to train children to address their elders with a “Yes, Sir!” and a “Yes, Ma’am!” regardless of position or status. I have often heard parents correct their children when they fail to address their elders as they have been instructed. This too is a lesson in humility.

- **Our children learn humility at the family altar and in the church pew – respect for God and His Word.**

We have seen the devastating effects on the child who is raised from little on to think that he is very “smart,” only because he reads many books written by intelligent men before him. Here parents must be very careful to instill in their children from little age the truth that there is no wisdom greater than to “fear God” and reverence His Word above all others. Parents must cause their children at an early age to sit still before God’s Word, hear it, read it, and learn it before all else. Home devotions, Bible reading!

Perhaps this is the place to mention that humility may be properly taught in the church pew.
We may grant that very small children will not get as much from the Word that is spoken and sung as their older brothers and sisters. But this is no argument for permitting the little ones to exercise their own wills in God’s house, or for bringing all kinds of playthings to entertain them! How shall the children learn to sit still and be still before God’s Word, if their parents don’t require it at a young age? “Let the little ones (Greek = TA PAIDIA= young children, infants!) come to me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.” (Matt. 19:14) If our Lord so commands, who are we to stand in the way, or do we think that He only refers to the Sacrament of Baptism?

• **We must teach our children to be humble regarding self and the things of this world; but “proud” of God and the things of His Word.**

Frankly, every one of us can relate to the Sinatra boast, “I Did It My Way,” because our fleshly nature will always take pride in what “Numero uno” is able to perform and possess for himself. The flesh of our flesh are inclined and encouraged to make the same boast as they grow up in their proud and sassy world. “The essence of humility is self-forgetfulness. When the love of Christ constrains us, and serving Him absorbs all our attention and energies, it simply does not matter whether we are regarded as craven or arrogant, so long as our Lord and His Kingdom are served.” [Kurt Marquardt, “Christian News,” October 31, 1977]

“Pride is effectively displaced when a person sees all his best and noblest achievements as ‘garbage’ (Phil. 3) compared with the infinite treasure that is in Christ. It is then equally impossible to be proud of oneself and to be ‘humble’ about Christ or His Word and Church – which the Savior expressly forbids – Mark 8:38! This then is the way, the only way, of true Christian humility, “as the Bible says, If you feel proud, feel proud of the Lord.” (1Cor. 1:31, Beck’s version) [Ibid.]

There is a way to “distract” the attention of our children away from sinful pride. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with teaching our children to take pleasure in what God has “gifted” or enabled them to do; and it is a terrible thing to see a jealous parent belittle the accomplishments of a child when he has done his best. But a child – especially one whose gifts are quite apparent to him and to others – must be reminded repeatedly that the glory belongs to God and they are to do all things to HIS glory, not their own.

Many would agree that Martin Luther was one of the most gifted and talented men in human history. Yet he ought to be held up to our children as a fine example of how to regard God’s gifts
in true humility. Near the end of his life (March 1542) he wrote:

“Personally, I have nothing good to say for myself, much less have I anything of which to boast. Like all human beings, I have been born in sins and death, under the devil. Moreover, my life is still such that I would like to have it better, except for the fact that I am no longer under the devil. If there is anything good in me, it certainly is not mine but my dear Lord God’s and my Savior Jesus Christ’s, whose gifts I should not deny.” ("spoken in defense of the consecration of his friend Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg." What Luther Says, 2642)

Pride is the opposite of humility; but to take quiet pleasure and not be ashamed of what God has given us or worked in us brings glory to Him, as our Lord indicated in His Sermon on the Mount: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father Who is in heaven.” So we ought to teach our children to have pleasure in what they are able to do for the glory of God, and for others, without crediting themselves for what He has enabled them to do by His gracious gifts and blessing.

Related to this is the need to be near enough to “hear” our children when they brag to others about their abilities or seek the praise of others. All such boasting, encouraged by our culture of self-esteem is sin! Children need to hear this from their parents at an early age. They need parental help both to recognize this sin, and to receive the assurance of forgiveness and the recreating power of the Gospel.

• **We must show our children the lowly face of Jesus – to serve others before self, to be a servant rather than to lord it over others.**

Earlier we noted that the “face” of humility is Jesus. Real humility is not to be a thing of pretense – a false humility, but lived by the indwelling of the “mind” of Christ through the power of His Gospel-grace. Paul teaches humility when he writes:

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each consider others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself of no reputation – taking the form of a servant when He came in the likeness of men.” (Phil. 2:3-7, transl. v.f.)
In the best environment children are the recipients of their parents’ daily consideration and care as long as they are living at home. Parents rightly consider their children “better” than themselves in the sense that they spend a great deal of time and effort looking out “for the interests” of their children. They “submit themselves” to their children in so many necessary and even unnecessary ways, that the young become “spoiled” the way God “spoiled” His Old Testament people, if we may say so.

It is good and we are glad that parents selflessly make themselves “small” to serve their children, as God and His Christ have freely and graciously stooped to serve and to save their people of all times. But our flesh and our children's flesh *is never satisfied and ever seeks its own advantage before the interests of others, whether God, our parents, our siblings, playmates, or workmates*. While it is good and right for parents to seek the advantage of their children over their own by submitting themselves to their children, no child should be permitted to seek its own advantage, at the expense of his parents or others, regardless of his age.

Children need to be reminded that while they may be the “center” of our world as parents (and grandparents), they must not demand center stage and our favor out of a fleshly notion that because they have experienced it, they own it and deserve it! Rather let us help them to see the humble face of Jesus, *Who, even though He was God and enjoyed all the joys and treasures of heaven, did not grasp it for Himself, but became a servant*. Practically, this means that, from an early age, children should be asked and required to serve their parents by expressing thanks for what they receive. As soon as the child is able, he should dress himself, make his bed, clear the table, clean his room, and help with other household chores.

Parents should not make the mistake of rewarding their children with bribes or even allowances, lest the wrong impression be given – that one serves in order to be rewarded. When they have done their best, humble servants say: “*We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do.*” *(Luke 17:10, KJV)* Teaching children to know how to handle money should come after they have learned the more important lesson of *looking not on their own interests only, but on the interests of others* in humble service.

The same lesson is taught when parents insist that their children share their toys with others, and consider the feelings and the needs of others. Working at the church, visiting nursing homes, raking yards for the elderly, and other activities which are done voluntarily for the well-being of others, should be encouraged by Christian parents.
Likewise, when their children begin to consider what their calling and work in life will be, parents should encourage them to look out not only for their own interests – which may indeed be fleshly and self-centered – but for the interests of others. Children should be encouraged to consider how they might best serve God with the abilities He has given them. They should be led to ask themselves, “How can I serve rather than be served, give of myself rather than get for myself.

And while we are on the subject, let us recognize the need to counter the proud, self-serving spirit of the world, which mocks the preaching and teaching ministry of God’s Word. Christian parents ought to instill in their children a strong interest in the spiritual and eternal welfare of the perishing souls around them! Rather than pushing and prodding their children to pursue material wealth and personal honor, let Christian parents first encourage them to consider whether they should prepare for the public ministry of the Gospel of Christ.

Children should never hear from their fathers what one father told his son before he entered the ministry: “Well, the ministry is all you are good for!” Indeed! – Is their a higher calling and work on this earth, more worthy of the faith and ability God gives to the lowliest sinner? The world does not see it, but Christians parents should – in the face of Jesus, Who humbly served that He might save!

- **So, finally, parents teach humility by their example, reflecting Jesus to their children.**

  – **Humbling themselves before the Lord.** When children see that Father and Mother need God, read the Bible, and pray to find His grace, strength, and blessing, they will be encouraged to do the same. On the other hand, if their parents despise God’s Word, rarely hear it preached and taught, and act as if they do not need God as their Savior, Protector and Provider of all that is good – If their parents seem to be quite content and self-sufficient, then neither will the children say from their hearts:  “My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:2), or “Your Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path (Ps. 119:105); nor will they pray “For Your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my iniquity; for it is great” (Ps. 25:11), or “Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.” (Ps. 61:2), and “Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me, O LORD!” (Ps. 70:1)

  – **Admitting their mistakes to their children.** No one really enjoys admitting that he has
made a mistake, much less confess that he has done wrong and committed a sin. Such humbling admissions can be even more difficult for the person who is in authority, like a parent. A father may be afraid that by admitting a mistake or wrong-doing, his children will lose respect for him, and love him less. In the interest of the child, however, the erring parent needs to be a good example, first and foremost.

If humbling himself before his children means that they may respect him less for a time, so be it. When a child looks at his father, it is far more important that he see a reflection of the humble face of Jesus, than to behold the proud countenance of the pharisee! Besides, children see through masks, especially the mask of a hypocrite worn by a proud parent who carries on as if he is never wrong. Every parent makes mistakes. To mask them before our children only encourages them to do the same – to be proud, not humble, to think more like the pharisee, rather than like Jesus.

– *Humbling themselves in their relations with others.* We should not hide the fact that we do not have all the answers. It’s okay to ask directions when we get lost, or to acknowledge that our child is better at something than we are. Our children should see us as seekers of wisdom and learning, first from the Word of our God, and also from the books of others.

We do not know everything, and it is important that our children know that we know it! “Know-it-all” parents do not raise humble children. Our Lord Jesus, went “about” His “Father’s business” by “listening” to the temple teachers, and asking them questions.” (Luke 2:46) In reflecting the mind of Jesus to their children, parents will show that they too are teachable!

Lastly, our children should see in us a reflection of the meekness of our Savior and theirs. We need to show restraint when people treat us unfairly; not shoot out the snarling lip or lay on the horn or call someone an “idiot” for failing to signal when changing lanes in front of us. Our patience may wear thin in dealing with the other drivers or a nasty store clerk; but our children should only see the face and hear the voice of Jesus. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me,” He says to us, “for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt. 11:29, NIV)

Vance Fossum
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