

HUMILITY IS FOUNDATIONAL

Humility is the root, the mother, the nurse, the foundation, and the bond of all virtue.

Contemporary culture often celebrates self-expression, personal achievement, and individual autonomy. While these qualities can be valuable, they can also encourage a subtle form of self-centeredness that places personal desires and interests above the well-being of others. J. D. Vance reflects on this tendency in *Communion: Finding My Way Back to Faith* through his discussion of Ayn Rand's influence on American thought.

Rand argued that rational self-interest is a virtue and that individuals should not be expected to sacrifice themselves for others.^[1] Her philosophy centers moral life on the autonomous individual and regards personal flourishing as the highest good.

The Christian tradition offers a fundamentally different vision. Writing to the church in Philippi, the Apostle Paul exhorts believers: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."^[2] Rather than elevating self-interest, Paul presents humility as essential to Christian character and communal life. His command suggests that the greatest threat to virtue is not weakness but excessive concern for oneself.

Christian thinkers throughout history have shared this conviction. Augustine famously taught that humility is the foundation of the Christian life, reportedly stating that if asked to identify the most important Christian virtues, he would answer, "first humility, second humility, and third humility."^[3] Augustine recognized that pride distorts the human person by encouraging self-sufficiency and diminishing dependence upon God and others.

Similarly, Thomas Aquinas defined humility as the virtue that restrains disordered self-exaltation and enables individuals to live truthfully.^[4] Humility does not require denying one's gifts or accomplishments; rather, it involves recognizing them accurately and understanding their proper place. According to Aquinas, humility protects individuals from the illusion that they are self-made or superior to others.

Modern writers have continued to emphasize this point. C. S. Lewis rejected the popular misconception that humility means thinking poorly of oneself. Instead, he argued that humility means thinking of oneself less often.^[5] Likewise, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung contends that many moral failures stem from vainglory, a disordered desire for recognition, praise, and approval.^[6] Even apparently virtuous actions can become corrupted when they are motivated primarily by the desire to be admired.

These perspectives point toward a common understanding of humility. For the purposes of this discussion, humility can be understood as a truthful awareness of oneself that

acknowledges both strengths and limitations and expresses itself through openness, teachability, and service toward others.

Humility neither exaggerates nor diminishes personal worth. Rather, it enables individuals to see themselves honestly.

Humility is foundational to the other virtues because it provides the moral orientation necessary for their proper exercise. Courage without humility can become recklessness or arrogance. Generosity without humility can become self-promotion. Leadership without humility can become domination. Even wisdom can become pride when it is detached from an honest recognition of one's limitations. In each case, the virtue remains vulnerable to corruption because the self has become the primary focus.

By contrast, humility creates conditions in which other virtues can flourish. A humble person remains teachable and therefore grows in wisdom. A humble person recognizes the needs of others and therefore practices compassion. A humble person acknowledges dependence upon God and therefore develops faith. Humility serves as an ordering virtue that directs human strengths toward their proper ends.

For this reason, humility should be regarded not merely as one virtue among many but as the foundation upon which others depend. From Paul and Augustine to Aquinas, Lewis, and DeYoung, Christian thinkers have consistently recognized that pride distorts character while humility restores it. By fostering truthful self-understanding and concern for others, humility enables the development of the virtues necessary for moral and spiritual flourishing.

[1] J. D. Vance, *Communion: Finding My Way Back to Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2026), xx.

[2] Phil. 2:3–4 (NRSV or your preferred translation).

[3] Augustine, *Letter 118*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), xx.

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 161, art. 1.

[5] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 121–22.

[6] Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), xx.

Honor with Respect. Act with Responsibility. Stand in Rectitude.

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