Humility
(Greek Word Study)

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Introduction

The concept of humility is communicated by a particular Greek word family.

The root literally identifies something that is “low-lying, not rising far from the ground” and figuratively describes one who is “lowly in spirit, unpretentious, humble.”

The noun, which signifies “having a humble opinion of one’s self, as reflected in a deep sense of one’s own moral littleness,” is simply defined as “humility, lowliness of mind, or modesty.”

The verb means “to make low, fig. to humble.”

Collectively, these words occur 30x in the NT. A study of these passages helps us better understand the nature of humility and the necessity of manifesting such a disposition.

Greek Words

The Adjective Tapeinos [5011]

Thomas defines tapeinos as “low-lying, fig. lowly, hence lowly in spirit” [5011].

BDAG say it pertains to “(1) being of low social status or to relative inability to cope, lowly, undistinguished, of no account; (2) being servile in manner, pliant, subservient, abject a neg. quality that would make one lose face in the Gr-Rom. world, opp. of a free person’s demeanor; (3) being unpretentious, humble.”

Strong/Thayer define it as “(1) not rising far from the ground; (2) metaphorically, (a) as a condition, lowly, of low degree; (b) brought low with grief, depressed; (c) lowly in spirit, humble; (d) in a bad sense, deporting one’s self abjectly, deferring servilely to others” [5011].

This word occurs 8x in the NT (Matt. 11:29; Luke 1:52; Rom. 12:16; 2 Cor. 7:6; 10:1; James 1:9; 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).

Matthew 11:29 ... 29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and *humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (NASB95)
Luke 1:52 “He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were *humble*. (NASB95)

Romans 12:16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the *lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. (NASB95)

2 Corinthians 7:6 But God, who comforts the *depressed*, comforted us by the coming of Titus; (NASB95)

2 Corinthians 10:1 1 Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am *meek* when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent! (NASB95)

James 1:9 But the brother of *humble* circumstances is to glory in his high position; (NASB95)

James 4:6 But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the *humble.*” (NASB95)

1 Peter 5:5 You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the *humble*. (NASB95)

**The Noun Tapeinophrosunē [5012a]**

Thomas defines tapeinophrosunē as from tapeinophrōn [humble-minded], meaning “lowness of mind, humility” [5012a].

BDAG say it refers to “humility, modesty.”

Strong/Thayer define it as “(1) the having a humble opinion of one’s self; (2) a deep sense of one’s (moral) littleness; (3) modesty, humility, lowness of mind” [5012].

This word occurs 7x in the NT (Acts 20:19; Eph. 4:2; Phil. 2:3; Col. 2:18, 23; 3:12; 1 Pet. 5:5).

Acts 20:19 19 serving the Lord with all *humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; (NASB95)

Ephesians 4:2 2 with all *humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, (NASB95)

Philippians 2:3 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with *humility of *mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; (NASB95)

Colossians 2:18 18 Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in *self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, (NASB95)
Colossians 2:23 ... 23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and *self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. (NASB95)

Colossians 3:12 ... 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, *humility, gentleness and patience; (NASB95)

1 Peter 5:5 ... 5 You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with *humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. (NASB95)

The Adjective Tapeinophrōn [5012b]

Thomas defines tapeinophrōn as a compound of tapeinos [low-lying, fig. lowly, hence lowly in spirit] and phrēn [heart, mind, thought: thinking], meaning “humble-minded” [5012b].

BDAG say it refers to one who is “humble.”

This word occurs 1x in the NT (1 Pet. 3:8).

1 Peter 3:8 ... 8 To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and *humble in *spirit; (NASB95)

The Verb Tapeinoō [5013]

Thomas defines tapeinoō as tapeinos [low-lying, fig. lowly, hence lowly in spirit], meaning “to make low, fig. to humble” [5013].

BDAG say it means “(1) to cause to be at a lower point, lower; (2) to cause someone to lose prestige or status, humble, humiliate, abase, done esp. to slaves, fig. ext. of 1; (a) with focus on reversal of status; (b) with focus on shaming; (c) with focus on punitive aspect; (3) to cause to be or become humble in attitude, humble, make humble in a favorable sense; (4) to subject to strict discipline, constrain, mortify.”

Strong/Thayer define it as “to make low, bring low; (a) to level, reduce to a plain; (b) metaphorically, to bring into a humble condition, reduce to meaner circumstances; (1) to assign a lower rank or place to; (2) to abase; (3) to be ranked below others who are honoured or rewarded; (4) to humble or abase myself by humble living; (c) to lower, depress; (1) of one’s soul bring down one’s pride; (2) to have a modest opinion of one’s self; (3) to behave in an unassuming manner; (4) devoid of all haughtiness” [5013].

This word occurs 14x in the NT (Matt. 18:4; 23:12 [2x]; Luke 3:5; 14:11 [2x]; 18:14 [2x]; 2 Cor. 11:7; 12:21; Phil. 2:8; 4:12; James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:6

Matthew 18:4 ... 4 “Whoever then *humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (NASB95)
Matthew 23:12 “Whoever exalts himself shall be *humbled; and whoever *humbles himself shall be exalted. (NASB95)

Luke 3:5 ‘Every ravine will be filled, And every mountain and hill will be *brought *low; The crooked will become straight, And the rough roads smooth; (NASB95)

Luke 14:11 “For everyone who exalts himself will be *humbled, and he who *humbles himself will be exalted.” (NASB95)

Luke 18:14 “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be *humbled, but he who *humbles himself will be exalted.” (NASB95)

2 Corinthians 11:7 Or did I commit a sin in *humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? (NASB95)

2 Corinthians 12:21 I am afraid that when I come again my God may *humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced. (NASB95)

Philippians 2:8 Being found in appearance as a man, He *humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (NASB95)

Philippians 4:12 I know how to *get *along with *humble *means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. (NASB95)

James 4:10 *Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. (NASB95)

1 Peter 5:6 Therefore *humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, (NASB95)

The Noun Tapeinōsis [5014]

Thomas defines tapeinōsis as from tapeinoō [to humble], meaning “low estate, humiliation” [5014].

BDAG say it refers to “(1) experience of a reversal in fortunes, humiliation as an experience; (2) an unpretentious state or condition, lowliness, humility, humble station; (3) a self-abasing demeanor, self-abasement, mortification.”

Strong/Thayer define it as “(1) lowness, low estate; (2) metaphorically, spiritual abasement, leading one to perceive and lament his (moral) littleness and guilt” [5014].

This word occurs 4x in the NT (Luke 1:48; Acts 8:33; Phil. 3:21; James 1:10).
Luke 1:48 ... 48 “For He has had regard for the *humble *state of His bondslave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. (NASB95)

Acts 8:33 ... 33 “In *humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who will relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth.” (NASB95)

Philippians 3:21 ... 21 who will transform the body of our *humble *state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (NASB95)

James 1:10 ... 10 and the rich man is to glory in his *humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. (NASB95)

**Biblical Examples**


Luke 3:3-6 ... 3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight. 5 ‘Every ravine will be filled, And every mountain and hill will be *brought *low; The crooked will become straight, And the rough roads smooth; 6 And all flesh will see the salvation of God.’ ” (NASB95)

Example of Children (Matthew 18:1-4).

Matthew 18:1-4 ... 1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, 3 and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 “Whoever then *humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (NASB95)

Example of Mary (Luke 1:46-53).

Luke 1:46-53 ... 46 And Mary said: “My soul exalts the Lord, 47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. 48 “For He has had regard for the *humble *state of His bondslave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. 49 “For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name. 50 “And His mercy is upon generation after generation Toward those who fear Him. 51 “He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. 52 “He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were *humble. 53 “He has filled the hungry with good things; And sent away the rich empty-handed. (NASB95)

Example of Paul (Acts 20:17-21; 2 Cor. 7:5-7; 10:1-2; 11:7-9; 12:19-21; Phil. 4:10-14).
Acts 20:17-21 ... 17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. 18 And when they had come to him, he said to them, “You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 19 serving the Lord with all *humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. (NASB95)

2 Corinthians 7:5-7 ... 5 For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. 6 But God, who comforts the *depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; 7 and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more. (NASB95)

2 Corinthians 10:1-2 ... 1 Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am *meek when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent! 2 I ask that when I am present I need not be bold with the confidence with which I propose to be courageous against some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh. (NASB95)

2 Corinthians 11:7-9 ... 7 Or did I commit a sin in *humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? 8 I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you; 9 and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so. (NASB95)

2 Corinthians 12:19-21 ... 19 All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. 20 For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; 21 I am afraid that when I come again my God may *humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced. (NASB95)

Philippians 4:10-14 ... 10 But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived my concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. 11 Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. 12 I know how to *get *along with *humble *means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. 14 Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. (NASB95)

Example of Christ (Matt. 11:28-30; Acts 8:26-35; Phil. 2:3-8).
Matthew 11:28-30 ... 28 “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (NASB95)

Acts 8:26-35 ... 26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) 27 So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” 30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: “He was led as a sheep to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He does not open His mouth. 33 “In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who will relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth.” 34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. (NASB95)

Philippians 2:3-8 ... 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (NASB95)

**Biblical Mandate**

Feigned humility is the fraudulent mask of hidden pride (Col. 2:18-23).

Colossians 2:18-23 ... 18 Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. 20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 21 “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” 22 (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? 23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. (NASB95)
Genuine humility is required of faithful disciples (Rom. 12:16; Eph. 4:1-3; Col. 3:12-14; James 1:9-11; 4:6, 10; 1 Pet. 3:8-9; 5:5-7).

Romans 12:16 ... 16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the *lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. (NASB95)

Ephesians 4:1-3 ... 1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all *humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (NASB95)

Colossians 3:12-14 ... 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, *humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. (NASB95)

James 1:9-11 ... 9 But the brother of *humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; 10 and the rich man is to glory in his *humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. 11 For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. (NASB95)

James 4:6 ... 6 But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the *humble.” (NASB95)

James 4:10 ... 10 *Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. (NASB95)

1 Peter 3:8-9 ... 8 To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and *humble in *spirit; 9 not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. (NASB95)

1 Peter 5:5-7 ... 5 You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with *humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the *humble. 6 Therefore *humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. (NASB95)

**Conclusion**

Consider the hope of the faithful (Phil. 3:20-21).

Philippians 3:20-21 ... 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our *humble
*state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (NASB95)

However, for this hope to be realized, genuine humility is essential (Matt. 23:8-12; Luke 14:7-11; 18:9-14).

Matthew 23:8-12 ... 8 “But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 “Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11 “But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 “Whoever exalts himself shall be *humbled; and whoever *humbles himself shall be exalted. (NASB95)

Luke 14:7-11 ... 7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this man,’ and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. 10 “But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. 11 “For everyone who exalts himself will be *humbled, and he who *humbles himself will be exalted.” (NASB95)

Luke 18:9-14 ... 9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ 13 “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ 14 “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be *humbled, but he who *humbles himself will be exalted.” (NASB95)