



humbled

Welcoming the Uncomfortable
Work of God

David Mathis

“Do you ever tune out when the doctor reminds you to eat a healthy diet and maintain an exercise program? You know you need to do those things, but perhaps what you are lacking is a timely or compelling *why* to fuel your motivation. If this is how you regard the scriptural exhortation to humble yourself, the pages that follow will help you tune in to many timely and compelling *whys*. *Humbled* will give you a new perspective of the myriad of ways that God works in your life.”

Gloria Furman, author of *Labor with Hope* and *A Tale of Two Kings*

“David is once again a very reliable guide. He is careful with Scripture and always clear and pastoral. In this short book, he takes an important piece of humility—‘humble yourself’—and lets us delight in being a little smaller and a little less special.”

Ed Welch, author, counselor, and faculty member at CCEF

“Humility is a counter-intuitive invitation to holy bliss and human flourishing—to receive with gratitude our creatureliness and to live so that the glory of God shines through us. This book from David Mathis is a powerful and concise treatment of an indispensable virtue.”

Trevin Wax, vice president for research and resource development at the North American Mission Board and visiting professor at Wheaton College; author of *Rethink Your Self*, *This Is Our Time*, and *Counterfeit Gospels*

“The Bible’s call to humility is clear and yet few of us pursue it with the diligence of which the Bible speaks. What David Mathis has given us in this book is a brief, clear, sober, and most importantly humble call for the pursuit of the uniquely human virtue of humility to the glory of God. Humility does not come naturally. Nothing that glorifies Christ ever does. David Mathis reminds us that it is the pleasure of the Holy Spirit to direct us in humility and thus make us more like Christ, who amazingly humbled himself. This is a quick read, yet long-lasting and encouraging in its impact.”

Anthony Carter, lead pastor of East Point Church;
author of *Running from Mercy* and *Black and Reformed*

“Although humility is a quality many of us admire, very few of us understand its significance or desire to pursue it personally. In *Humbled*, David Mathis has contributed a work that I believe will unlock an essential teaching of Scripture that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. I am so grateful for how David uses Scripture faithfully to show us why humility is to be desired, and yet he is realistic with the difficult work that must take place to produce humility in our hearts. It is truly a work that is initiated by God but one that we participate in. David gives practical advice on how to position ourselves for this deep work of God in our lives and reminds us that humility is at the heart of the gospel.”

Afshin Ziafat, lead pastor, Providence Church, Frisco,
Texas; council member, The Gospel Coalition

“*Humbled* is a small but mighty book, packed with biblical wisdom and countercultural insight. Mathis is incisive, eloquent, and rigorously faithful to Scripture. I can’t recommend this book enough, especially to my fellow young Christians.”

Jaquelle Crowe Ferris, author, *This Changes Everything*; cofounder, TheYoungWriter.com

“David Mathis serves us all by pointing us to a topic we can’t think too much about. I give much of my time to leading conversations about race and racism. The number one thing I wish we all had more of in the conversation is humility. Mathis reminds us that God is the One who humbles us. Read this book to learn how you should respond to His merciful, humbling hand—however heavy it may seem.”

Isaac Adams, assistant pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church; founder, United? We Pray

“Biblical, insightful, and convicting, *Humbled* is a fresh reminder to receive the humbling of God as a call to become more Christlike. In our world of self-promotion, Mathis challenges us to heed the lessons of humility woven throughout Scripture and welcome the uncomfortable work of God who brings all things for our good and His glory.”

Vaneetha Risner, author of *Walking Through Fire: A Memoir of Loss and Redemption*

“This book offers sweet relief for those being humbled and a clear path of preparation for those in more clement seasons. Mathis weaves insights from the stories of kings in the Bible, culminating in the humility of the King of kings. This powerful book would make an excellent study for Sunday school, small groups, or leadership teams.”

Gerrit Dawson, senior pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge

“In *Humbled*, Mathis has once again given the church a resource that not only engages the heart and mind, but is also clearly purposed to equip our hands for daily Christian living. This work feels as timely as it does timeless. David is faithful to let the word of God do the heavy lifting as he clarifies, at times with great nuance, the purpose and process behind the command to ‘humble yourself.’ With every passing chapter, I felt a growing excitement at the blessing that could reach my own heart, home, and city if God were to do this kind of *Humbled* work in me.”

Matt Bradner, staff development, Campus Outreach



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To Megan

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Introduction

God humbled the whole world in 2020. First China, then Italy, England, and all of Europe. Then, the purported “greatest nation in the world,” at least in many American eyes, was humbled as much, if not more, than any other. I can’t speak for other countries, but as an American, I remember wave after humbling wave, and the ripples haven’t yet subsided.

Here it all seemed to turn on a dime. Coronavirus in China was back-page news. Then, seemingly all of a sudden, fever pitch. And you know it’s serious when Americans cancel a major sporting event, like the NCAA basketball tournament. Then the NBA season. And Major League Baseball sent everyone home from Spring Training.

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States instituted lockdowns, forced quarantines, and mask mandates in varying degrees. Idol after American idol was postponed and cancelled. We were awash in uncertainty and wild speculation. Even the seeming experts were out of their league. We were waking afresh to how little we really know, how little control we have, and how fragile our lives and world can be.

As we struggled to wade through the new avalanche of enigmas unleashed by COVID-19, the death of George Floyd (not far from my own home), and the subsequent protests and riots, in Minneapolis and beyond, brought additional waves of humbling. Not only about the present. Now more questions about the past. And what will this all mean for our future?

Of course, the humbling didn't stay nice and hermetically sealed off to 2020. Just days into the new year, as Congress gathered to count the electoral votes, a mob breached barriers to push onto the grounds, and some into the halls, of the Capitol itself, some snapping selfies, but some armed, seemingly ready to unleash shocking violence if given the chance.

Before a watching world, this was yet another humbling event for the United States, a nation that

puts itself forward to the world as a beacon of democracy and a model of order, domestic tranquility, and the peaceful transition of power. The nation that offers to help other nations hold peaceful elections struggled with the aftermath of its own.

But for most of us, the humbling of nations through novel viruses, civil unrest, and threats of insurrection pales in comparison to the humbling circumstances that often devastate our own lives. For the vast majority of us, the daily news and its catalogue of humblings, mild and severe, touch our little lives very little.

Our most earth-shattering humblings are often known by only friends and family, even as the edifice of our lives can feel like it's crashing down. The loss of a job. The loss of a child. The loss of a spouse. Divorce. A terrible accident. The exposure of some private

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sin, whether sexual, financial, substance abuse, or some other embarrassment.

It could be the corrective words, however gracious, of a spouse or close friend.

It could be finding ourselves newly laid bare before our God in daily meditation as his Word does its wonderful and uncomfortable work on us.

How many of us have found that God himself, through the Scriptures and the power of his Spirit, not only gives us spiritual life by feeding our souls but also exposes, and cuts painfully toward, the cancers of sin within us:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb. 4:12-13)

Humbled. To live in this world, fallen as it is, and sinners as we are, is to be humbled. It's only a matter of time.

Only the grace of God gives us breathing room between our many and memorable humblings. God could undo us daily if he chose. We'd be fully deserving of it. Yet in his kindness and patience, he unfolds our lives as far more than a series of humblings. We experience far more days of grace and joy than we deserve.

However, our God is not so unloving as to let us parade ever on through this life without the severe mercy of his humbling hand. It descends, often without warning. We're caught off guard. It hurts to be humbled. We do not want it. We would pray, like Jesus, for the cup to pass. But it is here, as we each kneel in our own Gethsemanes before our Father, that he does his genuine humbling work in us—on his terms, not the ones we would choose. In his timing, not ours.

How do I humble myself? In one sense, it's a question Scripture prompts us to ask, because we are commanded to humble ourselves. "Seek humility"

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(Zeph. 2:3). “Put on . . . humility” (Col. 3:12). “Have . . . a humble mind” (1 Pet. 3:8). “Humble yourselves before the Lord” (James 4:10). “Humble yourselves . . . under the mighty hand of God” (1 Pet. 5:6). Okay, then, how do I humble myself? Yet this could be a question we approach in a quintessentially, unhumbled American kind of way, assuming we can just up and do it. *Just tell me how. I’ll get it done.*

In contrast to this attitude, the humble-self theme in Scripture turns our human instincts and assumptions upside down. Yes, this is indeed a biblical directive. And at the same time, it’s not something we can

just up and do. We cannot humble ourselves by our own bootstraps.

We cannot humble ourselves by our own bootstraps.

When we trace out this language of self-humbling going back to Exodus and the lowly

Moses standing before Pharaoh, mighty and arrogant, and through the history of Israel’s kings (especially in 2 Chronicles), to the exile and restoration, and into

the ministry of Jesus and the words of the apostles, we find this to be a humbling theme indeed.

We humans are not the drivers of our own humility. Our God designs the humbling way in which he forges the virtue of humility. He takes the initiative. He acts first. Our humility happens on his terms. He sees. He knows. He moves, with sovereign, omnipotent, meticulous care. He is intimately engaged with his created world and with each of his creatures. He is the one who humbles us with his mighty hand, and when his humbling hand descends and we're cut to our knees or flat on the ground, then the question comes to us: Will you *humble yourself* and embrace God's humbling hand, or will you try to fight back?

Will you receive his humbling providences, or attempt to explain them away?

Will you soften to him in humility, or harden with pride?

True self-humbling is not our initiative, but it does require our doing as we learn to welcome the uncomfortable work of God.

Is there anything we can do to seek humility, or are we simply left to wait for God's next severe mercy

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to humble us? God has given means of his grace to pursue, and to build habits in light of, so that when his humbling hand does descend again, we might be ready to receive it as what it is, embrace him in faith, and genuinely humble ourselves in response to his uncomfortable work.

This short book is a modest study of the trail of humble-self language in Scripture. I hope it will provide Christians with some fresh categories for thinking about humility and fresh avenues for pursuing humility in a humble way—and perhaps an unexpected vantage on the spiritual disciplines or “habits of grace” God gives us for the Christian life. I make no pretense in this book to capture a full theology of the virtue of humility, though our study will begin with a working definition in chapter 1. Specifically, I’m following the lead of the “humble-self” texts for what we might discover not as much about humility in general, though that’s not unimportant, but specifically (and practically) about what it means to pursue humility, and especially to humble-self, when God is the one who initiates our humbling, not us.

Chapter 1

How Do I Humble Myself?

To the humble he gives favor.

Proverbs 3:34

Humility is beyond our grasp. It is not something we can achieve. We might consider it quintessentially American to think we could. *You can do it. Be proactive. Take the first step. Grab the bull by the horns and be humble.*

In other words, *humble yourself by your own bootstraps.*

But when we come to the Scriptures, we find ourselves in a different world. Genuine humility, as with genuine faith, is not self-help or a life hack, but a response to divine initiative and help. Yet before we

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assume too much, let's ask what *humility* is in biblical terms.

What Is Humility?

Fittingly, the first mention of humility in all the Bible comes in the escalating showdown between Egypt's Pharaoh and Israel's God, mediated through Moses.

Moses first dared to appear before Pharaoh in Exodus 5 and introduce him to "Yahweh," God's personal name revealed to him at the burning bush represented in our English translations as LORD in all caps. Moses speaks on Yahweh's behalf, "Let my people go." To which Pharaoh replies "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go" (Exod. 5:2).

Mark that.

Pharaoh, swollen in his conception of self (pride), has miscalculated his status and abilities as a creature in relation to the Creator God. Through Moses, God speaks to Egypt's head and calls for him to *obey*. And Pharaoh refuses.

Exodus 10:3 then describes this as a call to humility. After seven plagues, on the cusp of an eighth,

God speaks to Pharaoh: “How long will you refuse to *humble yourself* before me?”

The piercing question, in the context of this extended power encounter, gives us this glimpse into the heart of humility: *humility acknowledges and obeys the one who is truly God*. Humility entails a right view of self, as created by and accountable to God—and this requires a right view of God, as Creator and as authoritative in relation to his creatures. Humility is not, then, preoccupied with oneself and one’s own lowliness, but first mindful and conscious of God and his highness. Humility becomes conscious of self only with respect to God.

Humility entails a right view of self, as created by and accountable to God.

Is God Humble?

Put another way, humility embraces the reality that *I am not God*. Pride led to humanity’s fall when Adam and Eve desired to “be like God” (Gen. 3:5) contrary to

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his command. Humility would have trusted him and obeyed his command.

Humility, then, is a *creaturely virtue*. It is a posture of soul and body and life that acknowledges and embraces the goodness of God and the humanness of self, which means that “Is God humble?” is a tricky question. The answer is no, but not because God is the opposite of what we would consider humble. He is not arrogant or prideful. Rather, humility is a creaturely virtue, and he is God—Creator, not creature. The essence of humility, we might say with John Piper, is “to feel and think and say and act in a way that shows *I am not God*.”¹ And genuine humility, as we will see, is not self-made or self-started, but a response to divine initiative and help. And we will see in chapter 8 what it means to be humble when God himself becomes man in the person of Christ.

¹ “Is God Humble?” Ask Pastor John podcast, April 17, 2020, available online at <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-god-humble>.

God Opposes the Proud

Make no mistake, we do have a part to play in humility. We are to *be humble*. It is to be truly *our humility*, though we might say *not our own*. Humility is not only an effect but a command. In particular, two apostles tell us directly to *humble ourselves*. And they do so in strikingly similar ways, adding the promise that God will exalt us on the other side:

Humble yourselves before the Lord,
and he will exalt you. (James 4:10)

Humble yourselves . . . under the mighty
hand of God so that at the proper time
he may exalt you. (1 Pet. 5:6)

So far as we can tell, James and Peter haven't been inspired by each other on this point, but by the Old Testament. In the immediate context of instructing us to humble ourselves, both quote the Greek translation of Proverbs 3:34—"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). But before you run off to create your own program for

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self-humbling, at your initiative, with a list of your to-dos, let's linger here a few moments to consider the context in both passages.

Humbling from Within

We should note that both of these calls to self-humbling come *in response to trials*. James refers to quarrels and fights within the church:

What causes *quarrels* and what causes *fights* among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you *fight and quarrel*. (James 4:1–2)

Conflict among those claiming the name of Christ humbles the church. It serves as a test of pride and humility. James not only reminds these quarreling Christians that they are “sinners” and “double-minded,” but he also rehearses the divine promise of Proverbs 3:34. He charges the church to submit to

God, resist the devil, and draw near to God (James 4:7-8). In other words, “Humble yourselves before the Lord.” The church is being humbled *from within*. Now, how will they respond to God’s humbling purposes in this conflict? Will they humble themselves?

Humbling from Without

So also, in 1 Peter, the church is under external pressure. Society is mouthing insults and maligning these early Christians. They are beginning to suffer socially and emotionally, even if not yet physically. They are under growing threat and tempted to be anxious. And at this moment of humbling, Peter turns to Proverbs 3:34 and exhorts them, “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another” (1 Pet. 5:5).

Here the church’s humbling is coming *from without*. Now, how will they respond to God’s humbling purposes in these insults? Will they humble themselves? Will they bow up, reacting defensively with pride and self-exaltation, or will they bow down, humbling

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themselves before the gracious hand, rebuke, and perfect timing of their Lord?

Self-Humbling as Responsive

Over and over again in the Bible, self-humbling is not something we initiate but something we receive, even embrace, even welcome—when God does his humbling work—however direct or indirect his means. The invitation to *humble ourselves* does not come to us in a vacuum but through our first *being humbled*. First, God gets our attention with disruption, then invites us to welcome his mercy, however severe and painful.

Humility, like faith—and as a manifestation of faith—is not an achievement. Humility is not fundamentally a human initiative, but a proper, God-given response in us to God himself and his glory and his purposes in the world and in our lives.

We don't teach ourselves to be humble. There's no five-step plan for becoming more humble in the next week or month. Within measure, we might take certain steps, in faith, to cultivate a posture of humility

in ourselves (more on those in chapters 3–7). But the main test (and opportunity) comes when we are confronted, unsettled, and accosted—in the moments when our semblances of control vanish and we’re taken off guard by the hard edges of life in a fallen world—and the question comes to us: *How will you respond to these humbling circumstances? Will you humble yourself?*

Gladly Receive the Uncomfortable God

For Christians, self-humbling is mainly responsive. We don’t initiate humility, and we don’t get the credit for it. It’s no less active and no less difficult, but it is responsive to who God is, what he has said to us in his Word, and what he is doing in the world, specifically as it comes to bear in all its inconvenience and pain and disappointment in our own lives. Self-humbling is, in essence, gladly receiving God’s person, words, and acts when doing so is not easy or comfortable.

First come the disruptive words or circumstances, in God’s hand and plan, that humble us—as it

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happened for King Hezekiah seven centuries before Christ. God healed him from his deathbed, and yet the

Self-humbling is, in essence, gladly receiving God's person, words, and acts when doing so is not easy or comfortable.

king "did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud" (2 Chron. 32:25a). The king's enduring pride invited divine intervention, and necessitated its severity. In righteous wrath, though not without mercy, God took action against Hezekiah's pride. He

humbled him. In whatever form it took, we're told that "wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem" (v. 25b).

Then comes the question that presses against our souls in our humbling providences, as it did for the king: Will I *receive* God's humbling or resist it? Will I try to explain it away or push back against it, or will it lead me to genuine repentance? If I do not *humble myself*, then further divine humbling will follow in

time. God's initial humbling leads unavoidably to a further humbling. The question is whether it will be our self-humbling or further (and often more severe) humbling from him.

Hezekiah acknowledged the divine wrath as opposition to his own pride, and he "humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah" (v. 26).

When God Humbles His People

To be sure, we are not left without some postures to cultivate and means to pursue. Daily humbling ourselves under the authority of God's Word, by obeying his words, and by coming desperately to him in prayer and in fasting—these all have their place in our overall response as creatures to our Creator. But first and foremost, we need to know humbling ourselves is a response to God.

God is the one who created our world from nothing by the power of his Word (Heb. 11:3). He is the one who formed the first man from the ground (Gen. 2:7) and

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the first woman from his side (Gen. 2:21–22). He is the one who chose to reveal himself to us, to speak words into our world through his prophets and apostles, to make known himself and his Son and his plan for our redemption. And he is the one who, through the gentleness and merciful severity of his providence, humbles his church again and again, from without and from within, and in his humbling brings us to the fork in the road: *Now, how will you respond to my humbling purposes in this trial? Will you humble yourself?*

When the next humbling trial comes, will you bow up with pride, or bow down in humility before your Maker, Redeemer, and Friend?

This is the moment of choice we all have faced in our own stories, and we will face it again. Perhaps soon. Will you be ready? When the next humbling trial comes, will you bow up with pride, or bow down in humility before your Maker, Redeemer, and Friend? God has a

particular promise for you in these moments. The God of all power will exalt the humble in his perfect timing.

“Humbled will give you a new perspective of the myriad of ways God works in your life.” —**GLORIA FURMAN**

“Read this book to learn how you should respond to God’s merciful, humbling hand—however heavy it may seem.” —**ISAAC ADAMS**

“This book from David Mathis is a powerful and concise treatment of an indispensable virtue.” —**TREVIN WAX**

How do I humble myself?

This concise, accessible study of Scripture’s humble-self language uncovers two surprising lessons about the pursuit of humility in the Christian—both what we *cannot* do, and what we *can*.



David Mathis is executive editor of desiringGod.org, pastor at Cities Church, and adjunct professor for Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is the author of *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines*. His articles and messages are available online at desiringGod.org/mathis. David is married to Megan and is the father of four children.

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