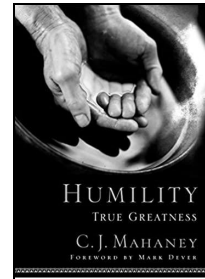


HUMILITY: TRUE GREATNESS

By C. J. MAHANEY



Pete Payne

Pastor, Grace Community Church (Warminster, CO)

The Shaping Virtue of Humility

OUR WORLD HAS ESSENTIALLY determined that how we feel about ourselves at any given moment is of the utmost importance. From that perspective, I have done an extremely stupid thing. I volunteered to write a recommendation for C.J. Mahaney's book, *Humility: True Greatness*.

At first, I was looking forward to revisiting the book, in preparation for this assignment. I thought it would be humble of me to rely not on my memory, but instead on a fresh reading. That would best position me to exhort the spiritually younger and less humble to read in order to be helped, as I have been, by C.J.'s writing. Bad idea, for a number of reasons.

Humility is one of those biblically-defined constructs, like love, which has been significantly targeted for distortion by the combined forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Sadly, humility has come to be the attribute that everyone pretends to respect, but no one really wants (like Miss Congeniality at a beauty contest, or Most Sportsmanlike at an athletic awards dinner). Humility focuses on the good of others and is therefore intended only for losers. In a world dominated by feeling good about me, no one truly feels good about being 'a humble man with much to be humble about.'⁴⁵

In re-reading *Humility*, I was reminded of why I love C.J.'s teaching and the richly theological and intensely practical aspects of his life and ministry. When my children were young, our family traveled to annual Celebration conferences. I was always amazed that my elementary-aged children not only could remember C.J.'s messages, but also could understand the takeaways, as well. Somehow, during the same messages, I was being challenged and instructed as a husband, father, and pastor.

⁴⁵ Attributed to Winston Churchill

So it is with *Humility*. This is a book that can be studied effectively by parents with their children. “Humility is our greatest friend; pride our greatest enemy.” It is a book that does not cast the concept of humility on the trash heap of human philosophy, but defines it biblically. It is a book that exhorts each of us to examine our lives to see if this precious attribute, one that draws the attention and esteem of God, himself, is present and increasing. It is a book that holds out God’s promise of true greatness through genuine servanthood. And it is a book, most significantly, that points us to the greatest example of humility—the Lord Jesus Christ—and advocates that while we must emulate his example, we cannot do so until we have been ransomed and transformed by the quintessential demonstration of humility, his death on a cross.

I have been a believer for nearly 6 decades and involved in ministry leadership for more than half of that, but in re-reading this book, I was freshly convicted of my pride and regretful that I had not made a habit of taking the time to read this book on an annual basis. C.J. pointed me to Jesus; he directed me to the Word of God; he introduced me to his current and historical friends who through their writings had instructed him in the beauty and promise of humility as presented in Scripture. In his inimitable manner, he also reminded me of many wonderful and practical habits, rooted in the “whys” of Scripture, helping me to refocus on the path to true greatness, so often obscured by the enemies of my soul—world, flesh, and devil. He reminded me, as always, that it is not the hearers or even knowers of the Word, but the “doers” who will ultimately be found to be humble in the sight of God.

Humility: True Greatness is rich exhortation from a true, biblical friend, who longs for us all to join him as he endeavors to work out his salvation with the godly fear and trembling that is characteristic of genuine humility. If you have never read it, please move it to the top of your reading list. If you have read it before, read it again, trusting that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Part III contains potentially the most helpful section of the book. Here, he examines the Bible's words for happiness, yielding over 2,000 occurrences of synonyms. Alcorn helpfully explains why blessed is often chosen by translators over happiness and convincingly argues that these are to be treated as synonyms. A clear and compelling study of the biblical words *asher*, *samach*, *markarios*, *chara*, and *chairō* leads to the overwhelming conclusion that happiness really matters to God!

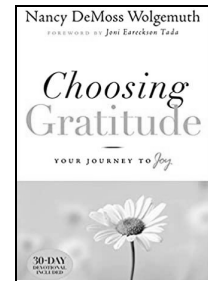
Alcorn turns a corner in Part IV to address our experience of happiness. He delves into the Christian's pursuit of happiness through means such as prayer, the Word, and the cultivation of gratitude. This section is richly illustrative and very relevant for every day application.

Meditating on the themes of this book lifted higher my own expectations for happiness. As I read, I began to wonder at God's kindness, my enjoyment of creation and worship became more exuberant, my lament became more hopeful, and my delight became more firmly rooted in God.

I pray that you, too, are encouraged as you read that God strongly desires your happiness. And that he provides it in himself.

CHOOSING GRATITUDE: YOUR JOURNEY TO JOY

By NANCY DEMOSS WOLGEMUTH



Matt Gray

Pastor, Living Hope Church (Fayetteville, AR)

The Shaping Virtue of Gratitude

I'D LIKE FOR YOU to do something for me. Take your index and middle finger and place them on your neck. Do you feel a pulse? Good, then read this book!

Here's my point: while we can easily detect a pulse in our body, it is much more difficult to detect a pulse in our spiritual life. In her book, *Choosing Gratitude: Your Journey to Joy*, Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth places the Bible's call for gratitude upon our soul and asks, "Do you feel a pulse?"

Taking Your Gratitude Pulse

Perhaps you're like me, coming into this study of gratitude, assuming that you have a pretty good handle on the discipline. If so, expect not to find a throbbing pulse but a weak and faint one.

Throughout the book, I flashed between two different experiences: inspiration and conviction. I felt inspired to live a more grateful life for the glory of God. And simultaneously, I felt conviction where I have failed to glorify God as I ought.

This book is written for anyone who desires to live a life of gratitude. And why shouldn't we want to be more grateful? After all, as Wolgemuth says, "Giving thanks is an indicator of our true heart condition. Those who have been made righteous by the grace of God will be thankful people" (67).

Grace-Motivated Gratitude

Wolgemuth's recommendations throughout are grace motivated, not guilt motivated. Her book is gospel-centered from cover to cover. Having expected this to be a book demanding a discipline, I found it surprisingly refreshing. It is designed to reflect God's heart toward us, not scolding us to be more thankful but envisioning and empowering us with divine power to do so.

Using the gospel as the primary means of motivation to live gratefully, Wolgemuth states the problem in this way:

In response to our abounding guilt, God poured out super-abounding grace. Should it not follow, then, that super-abounding grace ought to be met by super-duper-abounding gratitude? But does it? Is the gratitude that flows out of your life as abounding as the grace that has flowed into your life? Undeniable guilt, plus undeserved grace, should equal unbridled gratitude...I say we start by making it our goal to have a heart that's as grateful toward God as the abounding grace He has poured into our life (35).

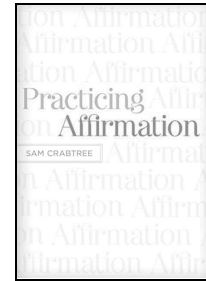
Expressing Gratitude

This is a book that offers you life, not death. It offers joy, not condemnation. It is filled with both principles from God's Word and practices for life application. For example, chapter 6 is devoted to the ways in which we can be intentional about giving thanks to those who are deserving in our life. Wolgemuth says, "Gratitude is not the quiet game. It begs to be expressed, both to God and to others. 'Silent gratitude,' Gladys Berthe Stern said, 'isn't much use to anyone'" (98).

I loved this book! No, I'm grateful for it! And if you decide to read it, I know you will be too.

PRACTICING AFFIRMATION: GOD-CENTERED PRAISE OF THOSE WHO ARE NOT GOD

By SAM CRABTREE



Philip Estrada

Lead Pastor, Mission City Fellowship (San Antonio, TX)

The Shaping Virtue of Encouragement

THE BOOKS IS *Practicing Affirmation* by Sam Crabtree. John Piper describes it as “a healing balm for cranks, misfits, and malcontents who are so full of self they scarcely see, let alone celebrate, the simple beauties of imperfect virtue in others. Or to say it differently: I need this book.”⁴⁶

Our beloved friend and pastor C.J. Mahaney gives a resounding affirmation of it when he says, “Too many of us use most of our words each day for criticizing and complaining. If you find that your communication lacks encouragement, if you want to grow in affirming others, if you plan to say any words at all today—please read this book!”⁴⁷

I’m not the sharpest tool in the shed but when John Piper says “I need this book” and C.J. Mahaney says “Please read this book,” I can take a hint. I should probably read this book!

What is Practicing Affirmation?

This book does more than simply help you to be a more encouraging person. Sam addresses affirmation as we typically understand it: puffing others up even if there really isn’t much to puff up. Someone we know expresses a desire to be president and instead of responding with affirmation that still lives in the realm of reality, we choose to affirm him with “psyched-up positive thinking” (101). This is actually a broken understanding of affirmation and sadly, our affirmation often looks this way. Sam points this out among other affirmation pitfalls, in his chapter “Mistakes I Have Made.”

Sam helps us see that affirmation doesn’t begin when our kid hits a home run. Affirmation began at the point when God designed all of creation to affirm his glory. Affirmation as designed by God is not merely telling

⁴⁶ From the Foreword.

⁴⁷ Back cover endorsement

someone “good game.” Instead, Sam helps us define biblical affirmation as being “God-centered, pointing to the image of God in a person.” He expands on this by saying, “The only commendable attributes in people were given to them. Everything is from God, through God, and to God so that in all things—including the commendable qualities in people—he might get the glory” (18).

Sam takes affirmation as we know it and unpacks it like the unwrapping of a priceless diamond that’s been hidden away in some dirty old rag. You knew there was something good wrapped up there, but as it is revealed to you, it is far more beautiful than you had previously imagined. I feel that this is the effect Sam’s helpful insight has had on my understanding of God-designed and God-centered affirmation.

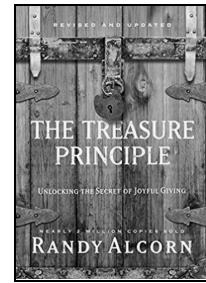
Why Give Ourselves to Practicing Affirmation?

When we withhold affirmation or are simply not looking for it, we fail to recognize and commend the image of God in all people. Image bearers are mirroring the image of the God they were created to reflect, some as restored mirrors and some as broken mirrors. That means that in both the regenerate and unregenerate, there is something there for us to commend. Should we avoid this topic altogether, we are in danger of falling short of giving God the glory he deserves. We also can miss out on the good that is found in recognizing God’s glory and work in people’s lives.

God has prepared for us many means of grace through the giving and receiving of God-exalting affirmation. My marriage, parenting, pastoring, preaching, and life lived among my neighbors have been refreshed in the joy of Christ by growing in seeing God at work through the practice of affirmation. May this book serve you in the same way.

THE TREASURE PRINCIPLE: UNLOCKING THE SECRET OF JOYFUL GIVING

By RANDY ALCORN



Cedric Moss

Senior Pastor, Kingdom Life Church (Nassau, Bahamas)

The Shaping Virtue of Generosity

AS ONE WHO IS skeptical by nature, I generally question claims people make—especially big claims. A big claim I questioned is one made by Randy Alcorn in the opening pages of his small book, *The Treasure Principle*. Alcorn boldly asserts that "there's a fundamental connection between our spiritual lives and how we think about and handle money and possessions" (9).

While I conceded that there is indeed a connection between the two, I doubted it was fundamental, so I was eager to read on to see how he would support it. Much to my surprise, Alcorn supports his big claim, and convincingly so. But he does much more; he makes a biblically sound case for generous giving founded on what he calls, *The Treasure Principle*: "You can't take it with you—but you can send it on ahead" (18).

Unearthed From Scripture

With theological carefulness and economy of words, Alcorn invites readers to accompany him on a thoughtful journey as he explores what Scripture teaches about giving. At the outset, he unearths *The Treasure Principle*, which he argues is the biblically-grounded reason for generous giving.

Along the way he identifies six Treasure Principle Keys, which are biblically-shaped attitudes which motivate generous giving. These keys are concisely crafted, and they give evidence that Alcorn has studied long and hard about what God's Word has to say about the topic. He provides transparent biblical support for his conclusions, allowing readers to hold them up to the light of Scripture to see if they are indeed so supported.

Illustrated Through Testimonies

Alcorn illustrates the message of *The Treasure Principle* through his own movie-like testimony of how the Lord used a difficult circumstance to lead him and his wife on a journey to become joyful, generous givers. He goes on to illustrate it through numerous testimonies of other people, of extraordinary and ordinary

financial means, who also discovered the joy of generous giving. And he convincingly dispels the false idea that one needs to be rich in order to be generous.

Indeed, as Alcorn points out, the Macedonian believers in 2 Corinthians 8, who were very poor, are an ongoing illustration of joyful generosity, despite their poverty. Thus, all readers, whatever their financial circumstances, will be inspired and envisioned by one or more of the testimonies.

Focused on Eternity

Among the most commendable features of *The Treasure Principle* is Alcorn's consistent reminder of the eternal consequences involved in how we view and handle money and possessions. He soberly observes: "He who lays up treasures on earth spends his life backing away from his treasures. To him death is loss" (45). Conversely, he points out: "He who lays up treasures in heaven looks forward to eternity; he's moving daily towards his treasures. To him death is gain" (45). Readers can't help but thoughtfully evaluate where their treasures are, and whether death will mean loss or gain.

If you have not read *The Treasure Principle*, hopefully by now you are wondering exactly what the six Treasure Principle Keys are. Read the book for yourself. Blessing awaits.

SERVING WITHOUT SINKING

By JOHN HINDLEY

Matt Chapman

Senior Pastor, Grace Church Bristol (Bristol, United Kingdom)



The Shaping Virtue of Servanthood

IF YOU EVER FEEL like your joy in serving is dwindling, perhaps especially as your life and ministry grow in busyness and complexity, this book offers sweet refreshment for the weary, serving soul. John Hindley's *Serving Without Sinking* is richly rooted in Scripture throughout its pages and helpfully autobiographical in places as well.

As Hindley shares in his introduction:

Christian service shouldn't leave us feeling irritated, exhausted, guilty, proud, bitter or lazy—but all too often I chat to Christians who feel one (or all!) of those things. I see them in myself, too ... This book comes out of what had happened in my soul, that turned serving Jesus from the thing I enjoyed the most into a chore that I resented and a duty I had to fulfill (8).

It's that honesty and openness from the author that makes his content so relatable and easy to engage. Hindley skillfully and graciously describes that growing weariness in us that we don't readily recognize in ourselves, but which is often lurking in the shadows of our service nonetheless.

Serving Without Sinking is a simple book but by no means simplistic. It addresses a whole variety of reasons, across its thirteen short chapters, as to why our joy in service might gradually give way to bitterness or burnout. Perhaps service has become mere duty, or instead we've turned it into our very life and identity. Perhaps we've been serving to make other people notice us, or even to impress God himself and gain his approval of us. At root, Hindley shows how joyless service almost always stems from a wrong view of Jesus, or ourselves, or other people.

What I found most helpful was that after identifying the common signs of a sinking servant, Hindley swiftly redirects our gaze to the reality that it's not our service that most matters anyway; it's Christ's. "[He] came not to be served but to serve (us!) and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). So our lives are not fundamentally built on how we serve him, but on his all-sufficient, saving service toward us.

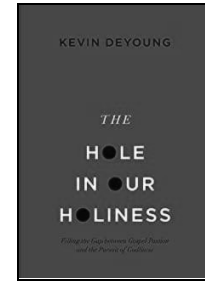
It's this reminder, Hindley says, that frees us first and foremost simply to enjoy and bask in his love. Only then will we find ourselves newly "set free to serve him longer, harder, braver, truer than we ever could otherwise" (10). Jesus offers his followers a "restful yoke" (15). "Rest from needing to achieve, to succeed, to be noticed, to be the best. Not rest from serving, but rest in serving (119).

This is a book that will not only encourage pastors, but one that could be placed enthusiastically into the hands of every serving church member and believer. Nor is its focus limited to only serving in the church, but also in the home, the workplace, and amongst family, neighbors, friends and strangers as well. It's full of Christ and full of grace, and the relief and good counsel it offers is impressive given its small size.

Perhaps the best recommendation I can give is simply one of personal testimony. This book refreshed my weary heart to press on in joyful service and in happy dependence on the Savior who came not to be served, but to seek, serve, and save, by gladly laying down his own life for us.

THE HOLE IN OUR HOLINESS: FILLING THE GAP BETWEEN GOSPEL PASSION AND THE PURSUIT OF GODLINESS

By KEVIN DEYOUNG



Erik Rangel

Pastor, Legacy Church (Yuma, AZ)

The Shaping Virtue of Godliness

ONE CAN SCARCELY BE in, around, or even aware of the church very long without deriving some notion of “holiness.” Clearly, there is God’s perfect holiness, and then there is some effect that his holiness is to have on his people. Beyond this, and despite our Bibles, there has developed a confusion even among gospel-loving people—a confusion leading to dangerous error. The result is what DeYoung calls a “hole” in our view of and growth in holiness.

His diagnosis is plain from the title and subtitle of the book. What ensues is a thoroughly biblical, often humorous, and altogether hope-filled encouragement toward true holiness for all the right reasons.

A False Dilemma and the Lie of a “Safer Danger”

DeYoung describes views of the gospel and of holiness that have led many in the church to run from legalism, right past holiness, and into a dangerous carelessness. He observes,

We know legalism (salvation by law keeping) and antinomianism (salvation without the need for law keeping) are both wrong, but antinomianism feels like a much safer danger (19).

The good news is that errors from either extreme are not our only options. Scripture makes clear that sin is what God has saved us from, holiness is what God has saved us to.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age (Titus 2:11–13).

Sorting out Mandates and Motives

In remarkably succinct terms, God's strong commands are shown to flow from his rich grace. Rejecting any hint of salvation being by works, or that sanctification depends solely upon us, DeYoung points to the many scriptures calling for holiness, listing more than three dozen biblical motivations for pursuing holy lives. Again, the clarity and brevity on such a complex topic are exceedingly helpful and what we've come to expect from the author.

In Defense of Effort

DeYoung blesses the reader by putting in its right place the role of human effort toward holiness. He identifies constant striving toward holiness as the command of Scripture as well as the glad response of the saint.

In very pastoral tones, the author writes,

There is a gap between our love for the gospel and our love for godliness. This must change. It's not pietism, legalism, or fundamentalism to take holiness seriously. It's the way of all those who have been called to a holy calling by a holy God (21).

Holiness, Already and Not Yet

Lest the believer ever feel the pursuit of holiness is futile, the author stirs our anticipation of ongoing increments of holiness until the perfect comes. DeYoung gently meets the reader in acknowledging present indwelling sin, yet he encourages the Christian toward the Spirit-enabled joy of increasingly pleasing our Lord on our way home to him.

Elaborating upon the Westminster Confession of Faith, DeYoung writes, "God not only works obedience in us by his grace, it's also by his grace that our imperfect obedience is acceptable in his sight" (68).

Dishonorable Mention – Sexual Immorality

While the book is a broad overview of the Bible's teaching on the holiness of believers, one chapter is dedicated to a particular fault besetting the church today—sexual immorality. By the end of this chapter and its special emphasis, the reader can only be glad it was included. We have slipped. A timely word indeed.

A Strong Nudge Toward a Deeper Dive

Relative to the subject matter, this is a very brief book. Even so, it makes a compelling biblical case for holiness as it cites hundreds of Scriptures and other works to move the reader toward continued examination. Including indices, short chapters, and a very thoughtful set of study questions, DeYoung gives the believer a true toolbox for ongoing personal and/or group study.

The Hole in Our Holiness provides real help in celebrating the saving and sanctifying grace of God.