

Articles and Sermons :: The World Hates Humility by William Law

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Every person, when he first applies himself to the exercise of this virtue of humility, must consider himself to be a learner. He has to learn something that is contrary to his former thinking and habits of mind, and which can only be gotten by daily and constant practice.

The seeker of humility not only has as much to do as he that is learning some new art or science, but he has also a great deal to unlearn. He has to forget and lay aside his own spirit, which has been a long time fixing and forming itself. He must also forget and depart from many passions and opinions, which the fashion, fads, and spirit of the world has made natural to him.

He must lay aside his own spirit, because we are born with an inclination toward sin and pride, which is as natural to us as self-love, and continually springs from it. This is one reason why Christianity is so often represented as a new birth and a new spirit.

He must lay aside the opinions and passions that he has received from the world. This is because the fads and fashion of the world—by which we have been carried away as in a flood before we could even pass right judgments on the value of things—is in many cases contrary to humility. Therefore, we must unlearn what the spirit of the world has taught us before we can be governed by the spirit of humility.

Now, according to the spirit and vogue of this world—whose corrupt air we have all breathed—many things pass for great, honorable, and very desirable. However, they are so far from being “great, honorable, and very desirable,” that the true greatness and honor of our nature consists in the not desiring them. Let’s consider some of these supposedly “great things”:

Wealth

Nice houses and costly clothes

To be adorned with beautiful things

To be attractive in our appearance

Titles of honor

To be above our fellow creatures, to command the bows and respect of other people

To be looked on with admiration

To overcome our enemies with power, to subdue all that oppose us

To set out ourselves in as much splendor as we can, to live highly and magnificently

To eat, and drink, and delight ourselves in the most costly manner

Many a man is afraid of refraining himself and not pursuing these things, unless the same world should call him a fool.

The history of the Gospel is chiefly the history of Christ’s conquest over the spirit of the world. The number of true Christians is only the number of those who, following the Spirit of Christ, have lived contrary to this spirit of the world.

“If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.” Again, “Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world.” “Set your affection on things above, and not on things on the earth; for ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” Ro. 8:9; 1 Jo. 5:4; Co. 3:2-3 This is the language of the whole New Testament, the mark of Christianity: you are to be dead—that is, dead to the spirit and mindset of the world—and live a new life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Notwithstanding the clarity and plainness of these doctrines of renunciation of the world, a great part of “Christians” live and die slaves to the culture and mindset of the society around them.

Would a man take ten years more drudgery in business to add two horses more to his coach, only because he knows that the world exceedingly admires a coach pulled by six horses?

How many people swell with pride and vanity for such things—things they would by no means know how to value, except those things are admired in the world! Would a man take ten years more drudgery in business to add two horses more

e to his coach, only because he knows that the world exceedingly admires a coach pulled by six horses? How fearful are many people of having their houses poorly furnished, or themselves humbly clothed, only for the reason that the world would disdain them and consider them low-class and underprivileged people!

How often would a man have forgiven the hurt caused by the haughtiness and ill nature of others, and shown a kind response, but that he dares not pass for such a "weak" man in the opinion of the world! Many a man would often drop a resentment and forgive an offense, except he is afraid that if he would do it, the world would look down upon him. How many would practice Christian temperance and sobriety in its utmost perfection, were it not for the censure that the world passes upon such a life!

Thus do the impressions that we have received from living in the world enslave our minds. We dare not attempt to be great in the sight of God and holy angels, for fear of being little in the eyes of the world!

From this quarter arises the greatest difficulty of humility, because humility cannot survive in any mind unless it is dead to the world, and has parted with all desires of enjoying its greatness and honors. So that in order to be truly humble, you must unlearn all those notions which you have been all your life learning from this corrupt spirit of the world.

Unless you can make a stand against the assaults of pride, the meek affections of humility can have no place in your soul... until you stop the power of the world over you and resolve against a blind obedience to the world's laws. And when you have advanced so far as to be able to refrain yourself in the flood of worldly fashions and opinions—and reexamine the worth and value of things that are most admired and valued in the world—you have gone a great way in the gaining of your freedom, and have laid a good foundation for the betterment of your heart. For as great as the power of the world is, it is all built upon a blind obedience to its value system; and we need only open our eyes to get freed of its power.

I hope you will not think it a hard saying, that in order to be humble you must withdraw your obedience from that vulgar spirit that guides snazzy-dressers and flirts, and form your value system according to piety. Again: to lessen your fear and regard to the opinion of the world, think how soon the world will disregard you, and have no more thought or concern about you than about the poorest animal that died in a ditch. Your friends, if they can, may bury you with some distinction and set up a monument to let posterity see that your dust lies under such a stone. But when that is done, all is done. Your place in the world is filled up by another, and the world goes on just like it did. But you are blotted out of its sight and as much forgotten by the world as if you had never belonged to it.

Think upon the rich, the great, and the learned persons that have made great figures and been high in the esteem of the world; many of them died in your time, and yet they are sunk, and lost, and gone... and as much disregarded by the world as if they had been only so many bubbles of water. Think, again, how many poor souls see heaven lost, and lie now expecting a miserable eternity because of their service and homage to a world that thinks itself just as well off without them, and is just as merry as it was when they were in it.

Is it therefore worth your while to lose the smallest degree of virtue for the sake of pleasing so bad a master and so false a friend as the world is? Is it worth your while to bow the knee to such an idol as this, that so soon will have neither eyes, nor ears, nor a heart to regard you; instead of serving that great, and holy, and mighty God, that will make all His servants partakers of His own eternity? Will you let the fear of a false world, who has no love for you, keep you from the fear of that God, who has only created you that He may love and bless you to all eternity?

Whoever professes Christianity, professes to live contrary to everything, and every mind-set, that is peculiar to this evil world.

Lastly, you must consider what behavior the profession of Christianity requires of you with regard to the world. This is plainly delivered in these words: "Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world." Gal. 1:4 Christianity therefore implies a deliverance from this world, and he that professes it, professes to live contrary to everything, and every mind-set, that is peculiar to this evil world.

John declares this opposition to the world in this manner: "They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God." 1 Jo. 4:5-6 This is the description of the followers of Christ; and it is clear enough that no people are to be counted as true Christians who in their hearts and thinking belong to this world. "We know," says the same apostle, "that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness." 1 Jo. 5:19

For all the customs, maxims, politics, and thinking of the world lie in wickedness. And he is only of God, or born of God in Christ Jesus, who has overcome this world; that is, who has chosen to live by believing Jesus and governing his actions by the principles of the wisdom revealed by Him.

Our blessed Lord Himself has fully determined this point in these words: “They are not of this world, even as I am not of this world.” Jo. 17:16 This is the state of Christianity with regard to this world. If you are not thus out of—and contrary to—the world, you lack the distinguishing mark of Christianity; you do not belong to Christ, but by being out of the world just like He was out of it.

We may deceive ourselves, if we please, with vain and softening comments upon these words; but they are, and always will be, understood in their first simplicity and plainness by every one that reads them in the same spirit that our Lord spoke them. And to understand them in any lower, less significant meaning is to let carnal wisdom explain away good doctrine.

The Christian’s great conquest over the world is all contained in the mystery of Christ upon the Cross. It was there, and from there, that He taught all Christians how they were to come out of and conquer the world, and what they were to do in order to be His disciples. All the doctrines, sacraments, and institutions of the Gospel are only so many explanations of the meaning and applications of the benefit of this great mystery. Christianity means nothing else, but an entire, absolute conformity to that Spirit which Christ showed in the mysterious sacrifice of Himself upon the cross.

Every man therefore is only so far a Christian as he partakes of this Spirit of Christ. It was this that made Paul so passionately express himself: “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” But why does he glory? Is it because Christ had suffered in his place, and had excused him from suffering?

No, by no means! But it was because his Christian profession had called him to the honor of suffering with Christ, and of dying to the world under reproach and contempt, as He had done upon the Cross. For he immediately adds: “by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” Ga. 6:14 This, you see, was the reason of his glory in the cross of Christ, because it had called him to the exact same state of death and crucifixion to the world.

Thus was the cross of Christ, in Paul’s days, the glory of Christians. He was not referring to their not being ashamed to own a Master that was crucified, but rather their glorying in a religion which was nothing else but a doctrine of the cross—a doctrine that called them to the same suffering spirit, the same sacrifice of themselves, the same renunciation of the world, the same humility and meekness, the same patient bearing of injuries, reproaches, and contempts; and the same dying to all the greatness, honors, and happiness of this world, which the dying Christ showed upon the cross.

The necessity of this conformity to all that Christ did and suffered upon our account is very plain from the whole tenor of Scripture:

As to His sufferings: this is the only condition of our being saved by them, “if we suffer” with Him, “we shall also reign with Him.” 2 Ti. 2:12

As to His crucifixion: “knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him,” Ro. 6:6, etc. Here you see Christ is not crucified in our place; but unless our old man be really crucified with Him, the cross of Christ will profit us nothing.

As to the death of Christ, the condition is this: “If we be dead with him,” we believe that “we shall also live with him.” 2 Ti. 2:11 If therefore Christ be dead alone, if we are not dead with Him, we are just as sure, from this Scripture, that we shall not live with Him.

As to the resurrection of Christ, the Scripture shows us how we are to partake of the benefit of it: “If ye be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.” Co. 3:1

While the words on this sign were probably meant in a positive way, the reality of many churches is that they love and serve the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.

This is the state of separation from the world, to which all orders of Christians are called. They must so far renounce all worldly thinking, be so far governed by another value system, as to show that they are truly and really crucified, dead, and risen with Christ. And it is as necessary for all Christians to conform to this great change of spirit, to be new creatures in Christ, as it was necessary that Christ should suffer, die, and rise again for our salvation.

In the exact same way the spirit of the world nailed our Lord to the cross, so every man that has the Spirit of Christ—that opposes the world as He did—will certainly be crucified by the world, in some way or other. This is because Christianity still lives in the same world that Christ did; and these two will be utter enemies, till the kingdom of darkness is entire

y annihilated.

Had you lived with our Savior as His true disciple, you would have then been hated as He was; and if you now live in His Spirit, the world will be the same enemy to you now that it was to Him then.

“If ye were of the world,” says our Lord, “the world would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.” Jo. 15:19

We are apt to lose the true meaning of these words by considering them only as an historical description of something that was the state of our Savior and His disciples at that time. But this is reading the Scripture as a dead letter; for they describe exactly the state of true Christians in our time—and at all other times—to the end of the world. Whoever has His Spirit will be hated, despised, and condemned by the world, just like He was. This happens because the world will always love its own, and none but its own: this is as certain and unchangeable as the contrariety between light and darkness.

You will perhaps say that the world has now become Christian, at least that part of it where we live; and therefore the world is not now so opposed to Christianity as when it was heathen.

It is granted, the world now professes Christianity. But will anyone say that this “Christian” world is of the Spirit of Christ? Is its general mind-set the mind-set of Christ? Are the passions of sensuality, self-love, pride, covetousness, ambition, and vainglory less contrary to the spirit of the Gospel now that they are “Christianized,” than when they were among heathens? Or will you say that the mind-set and passions of the heathen world are lost and gone?

Consider, secondly, what is meant by “the world.” Now this is fully described by John: “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” 1 Jo. 2:16 This is an exact and full description of the world. Now will you say that our society is become Christian? But if these three still exist, then “the world” still exists, and the same enemy to Christianity that did in John’s days. And indeed the world, by professing Christianity, is so far from being a less dangerous enemy than it was before, that it has by its favors destroyed more Christians than ever it did by the most violent persecution.

We must, therefore, be so far from considering the world as in a state of less enmity and opposition to Christianity than it was in the first times of the Gospel, that we must guard against it as a greater and more dangerous enemy now than it was in those times. It is a greater enemy because it has greater power over Christians by its favors, riches, honors, rewards, and protection, than it had by the fire and fury of its persecutions. It is a more dangerous enemy, by having lost its appearance of enmity.

Its outward profession of Christianity makes it no longer considered as an enemy, and therefore the generality of people are easily persuaded to resign themselves up to be governed and directed by it. How many consciences are kept at quiet, upon no other foundation than because they sin under the authority of the Christian world! How many principles of the Gospel are disregarded, and how unconcernedly do people read them, for no other reason than they seem to be disregarded by the “Christian” world!

How many compromises do people make to the “Christian” world, without any hesitation or remorse; which, if they had been required of them by heathens, would have been refused as contrary to the holiness of Christianity! Who could be content with seeing how contrary his life is to the Gospel, but because he sees that he lives like the rest of the “Christian” world does? Who, that reads the Gospel, would want to be persuaded of the necessity of great self-denial, humility, and poverty of spirit, but that the authority of the world has banished this “doctrine of the cross”?

There is nothing, therefore, that a good Christian ought to be more suspicious of, or more constantly guard against, than the authority of the “Christian” world. And all the passages of Scripture which represent the world as contrary to Christianity, which require our separation from it—as from a mammon of unrighteousness or a monster of iniquity—are all to be taken in the same strict sense in relation to the present “Christian” world. Because the change that our society has undergone has only altered its methods, but certainly not lessened its power of destroying religion.

Christians had nothing to fear from the heathen world but the loss of their lives; but when the world becomes a friend, it makes it difficult for them to save their religion. While pride, sensuality, covetousness, and ambition had only the authority of the heathen world, Christians were thereby made more intent upon the opposite virtues. But when pride, sensuality, covetousness, and ambition have the authority of the “Christian” world, then individual Christians are in the utmost da

nger, not only of being ashamed out of the practice, but of losing the very notion of the piety of the Gospel.

There is, therefore, hardly any possibility of saving yourself from the present world, except by considering it as the same wicked enemy to all true holiness, as it is represented in the Scriptures; and by assuring yourself that it is as dangerous to conform to its mindset and passions now that it is "Christian," as when it was heathen.

Need a man do more to make his soul unfit for the mercy of God, than by being greedy and ambitious of honor? Yet how can a man renounce this mindset, without renouncing the spirit and mindset of the culture in which you now live? How can a man be made more incapable of the Spirit of Christ, than by a wrong value for money? And yet, how can he be more wrong in his value of it, than by following the authority of the "Christian" world?

Nay, in every order and station of life, whether of schooling or business, either in church or State, you cannot live up to the spirit of true religion without renouncing the most general mindset and behavior of those who are of the same order and business as yourself.

These reflections will, I hope, help you to break through those difficulties and resist those temptations, which the authority and fashion of the world has raised against the practice of Christian humility. ~