



Foundational Essay

WALK HUMBLY

AMY PLANTINGA PAUW

INTRODUCTION


“Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble,” Mac Davis sang, “when you’re perfect in every way.”¹ His tongue-in-cheek song paints a picture of the self-deception and loneliness that fame and money can bring. It sounds paradoxical, but walking humbly is God’s way to abundant life. To walk humbly does not mean putting ourselves down or hiding our gifts, but it does require putting aside our obsessions with wealth, reputation, and power. It means we stop our anxious grasping and, instead, rest secure in who we are and who God has called us to be. To walk humbly is to claim the truth of who we are as God’s beloved children.

The phrase *walk humbly* comes to us from the prophet Micah: “God has told you, O mortal, what is good, / and what does the LORD require of you / but to do justice and to love kindness / and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Micah denounces the pretensions and corruptions of the capital city, Jerusalem. The people of Judah have tried to secure themselves through violence and injustice. Micah tells them that no showy acts of public worship will set them right with God. Instead, they must act like covenant people in their daily lives. The three things that God requires in Micah 6:8 are not separate items on a to-do list. They are interconnected and complementary; trying to practice one without the others will lead us astray. In particular, doing justice without walking humbly often devolves into self-righteousness. Practicing loving-kindness without walking humbly can turn into mere charity. Christians talk a lot about God’s call to justice and love. Micah shows us that walking humbly is key to embracing that call. This essay invites you to reflect on what it means to walk humbly by looking at four core biblical themes: remember that you are dust; favor the lowly; avoid judging others; and speak less, listen more.


REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST

It’s a common refrain at Ash Wednesday services. As someone puts the sign of the cross on your forehead with ashes, they declare, “you are dust, and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19b).

1. Mac Davis, “It’s Hard to Be Humble,” *Hard to Be Humble*, 1980 Casablanca Record and Filmworks LP.



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This reminder comes from the biblical story of creation. We like to think of ourselves as the crowning glory of God’s creation, exalted above everything else God has made. Surely God made us out of something really special! But Genesis 2:7 tells us that, when it comes time for God to create humanity, God fashions us out of “the dust of the ground.” In Hebrew, there is even a play on words to drive home the point. The human (*adam*) is created out of the ground (*adamah*). We are earth creatures, through and through. We can even make our own play on words in English, because the root of the word *humble* is *humus*—soil or dirt. To walk humbly is to stay grounded, to live like the earthlings we are. We are made of the same stuff as all of God’s creatures. And like the rest of creation, we will one day die and return to the dust from which we came.

We need that Ash Wednesday reminder that we are dust, because we spend too much of our time pretending that we are our own makers and keepers. We live as though watching our diet, insuring our valuables, and building a name for ourselves will make us invulnerable to death and loss. Like the foolish rich man in Jesus’ parable, we preoccupy ourselves with building bigger barns to store all our stuff (Luke 12:16–21). We forget that our times are in God’s hands, that our earthly treasures and accomplishments are all temporary, that death is the end of the earthly road for all of us. The truth is that we are dependent creatures living on borrowed breath; dust is where we came from, and dust is where we are headed. When we stop pretending that we are in control of our lives, we open up room for being grateful to God for each day we are given. Being dust does not make us less precious to God. There is no contradiction between goodness and finitude. Our earthly finitude is part of being God’s good, beloved creatures. To walk humbly is to acknowledge the beautiful, fragile gift of earthly life.

To walk humbly also has ecological implications. We have often lived as if we were not earth creatures, as if the earth were simply a storehouse of resources or a gymnasium for our recreational enjoyment. We have been greedy and careless, putting our own comfort and convenience ahead of the well-being of our planet. Stewardship of the earth is a good first step; it moves us from a posture of exploitation to a posture of care and protection. But to walk humbly requires us to go beyond the mindset of stewardship. We are not only caretakers of God’s creation; we are fellow creatures, made of the same dust. We are utterly dependent on earthly things—air and water and food and shelter—to sustain our lives. As earth creatures we are always receivers before we are stewards. We are members of what Wendell Berry calls “the Great Economy” of earthly life, an enormous interdependent network of creatures.² God has made us for life in communion with our fellow creatures. To pretend otherwise is self-delusional and ultimately self-destructive. To walk humbly is to rejoice in our shared creaturehood.

FAVOR THE LOWLY

Every part of the Bible’s wisdom can be twisted and badly interpreted. *Walk humbly* is no exception. Again and again, those with privilege and power have constricted the lives of others by urging them to stay humble and accept their lowly station in life. As Cornelius Plantinga notes, the Christian tradition “has often been dominated by whites who have preached humility to blacks, by men who have preached submissiveness to women, by

2. Wendell Berry, *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 54.



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rigid and unimaginative persons who have regarded every creative impulse, every struggle for personal dignity as a shameful show of arrogance.”³ *Walk humbly* has been twisted to mean “stay in your place,” “conform to others’ expectations of you,” and “don’t challenge the status quo.” It’s a good thing that the Bible gives us Mary as a model of humility! In Mary’s song, known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), she shows us the subversive power of walking humbly.

Mary acknowledges her *lowliness* in the eyes of society (Luke 1:48). She is a young, poor, peasant woman living under Roman occupation. However, God’s response to her low social position is not, “Stay that way and be humble.” Instead, God looks on her with favor, blessing and exalting her (Luke 1:48–49). As Mary rejoices in God’s blessing, she knows that this good news is not confined to her. God cares for all the lowly people of the world. God’s way in the world is to show special favor to the stranger, the orphan, and the outcast. Meanwhile, the rich and proud people who trust only in themselves suddenly find their lofty social position turned upside down (Luke 1:51–53). God does not defer to human hierarchies that harm and denigrate the vulnerable and suffering. Instead, God lifts up the lowly (Luke 1:52). When Mary’s son Jesus begins his public ministry in Luke 4, he will echo his mother’s insistence on God’s good news for the poor and oppressed (Luke 4:18–19).


Mary shows us that to walk humbly is to trust what God says about you, not what an unjust society has told you about yourself. Society may have told you that you are weak, inferior, unworthy, an abomination. But if you follow Mary’s example, walking humbly means resting secure in God’s call on your life, even in the face of oppression and criticism from others. God imbues Mary with what Diana Hayes describes as “outrageous authority,” allowing her to claim her special place in the story of Jesus. Despite her lowly status, she has no need to seek permission from Joseph, her father, or any religious authority figure before answering God’s call.⁴ God lifts up the lowly so that they can be unapologetic in claiming the identity God has given them and called them to. There is nothing subservient or self-denigrating about walking humbly with God.

AVOID JUDGING OTHERS


Walking humbly with God also requires walking humbly with each other. Religious people often find this to be a challenge. In Luke 18:9–14, Jesus illustrates this challenge with a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. The parable is addressed to those who trust in their own righteousness and “regard others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). Contemporary Christians love to criticize Pharisees for being legalistic or hypocritical. But contrary to popular stereotypes, the Pharisees were some of the most faithful religious people in Israel. They didn’t cheat or steal, they studied Scripture assiduously, and they tithed and fasted. Pharisees were the kind of member a lot of churches would love to have!

The Pharisee in Luke 18 is sincere about living a life pleasing to God. But in his religious zeal he fails to walk humbly. Instead of trusting in God, the Pharisee trusts in his own virtue, and this fills him with contempt for

3. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 86.
4. Diana Hayes, *And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1996), 86.



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others whom he regards as less worthy, like the tax collector. In the parable, the Pharisee stands by himself, not wanting to be contaminated by contact with those who are less faithful than he is. He prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people” (Luke 18:11). Meanwhile, the tax collector who is “standing far off” (Luke 18:13) is actually nearer to God than the Pharisee. The tax collector knows that God alone has the power to save and justify. He does not pretend that he has earned God’s favor by the way he lives. Instead, he humbly asks for God’s mercy.

Like the Pharisee, Christians today also struggle to walk humbly. The apostle Paul tells us that no member of Christ’s body can say to another, “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21). But we often try to live as if that were true, preferring arrogance and division over walking humbly together in Christ. We too are tempted to pray: “God, I thank you that I am not like other Christians—those liberals who don’t know how to read the Bible, those conservatives who don’t care about God’s call to justice.” Convinced of our superior piety and faithfulness, we regard our siblings in Christ with contempt.

Walking humbly with each other requires learning the hospitality of receiving. We usually think of hospitality in terms of giving to others. But a one-way relationship of giving is not conducive to walking humbly. God has gifts for us that we can receive only from the hands of another. No one earns their place at Christ’s table. We are all there at Christ’s invitation. We can recognize and appreciate the gifts others bring, even when they are not our gifts. We are called to speak the truth in love, but we are also called to listen in love for the truth others bring. Until we are ready to receive from others, we will not walk humbly.

This hospitality of receiving extends far beyond the church. How often have Christians thanked God that they are not like non-Christians! Following Jesus has sometimes been understood to require contempt for people from other religious traditions, under the assumption that Christians have nothing to learn, nothing to receive from them. But if we walk humbly as we follow Jesus, we will not claim to have a monopoly on wisdom and truth. We will instead remain receptive to what God may teach us through our Hindu son-in-law, our Muslim coworker, our Jewish neighbor. In a talk to Christian missionaries in India, Mahatma Gandhi pleaded with them, “open your hearts out to receive the treasures of this land, and you will not be disappointed, neither will you have misread the message of the Bible.”⁵ We do not misread the message of the Bible when we let other cultures and traditions enlarge our hearts and minds. We are more likely to misread the Bible if we are too proud to learn anything from others. Martin Luther King Jr. is a good example of the hospitality of receiving. He discovered that he came to a deeper understanding of the Christian doctrine of love through studying Gandhi’s method of nonviolence.⁶ According to King, what he received from the Hindu tradition of *satyagraha* made him a better Christian and a more effective Christian leader. Walking humbly with our religious others and remaining open to what they have to teach us is an integral part of being disciples of Jesus.



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5. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Gandhi on Christianity*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 41.

6. Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride toward Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1958), 96–97.

SPEAK LESS, LISTEN MORE

It's not an accident that the prophet Micah calls us to *walk* humbly, not *talk* humbly. Our words often get in the way of being humble. We have all heard people boast about how humble they are! As James reminds us, the tongue is only a small member of our body, but it can be a source of "restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8). We can use our tongue to tear others down, to take all the credit, to refuse to admit we're wrong, to bully and silence others. Intemperate speech and arrogance often go together. Our tongue can be the biggest obstacle to walking humbly with other people.

We can use our tongue for good things too, of course. We can use our words to praise God and build up others. We can speak to stand up for those who need defending. As Proverbs 31:8 urges, "Speak out for those who cannot speak." If our goal is to walk humbly, however, it is not enough to speak on behalf of others who have been oppressed or shamed into silence. As Nelle Morton insists, we must also embrace the work of "hearing others to speech."⁷ We walk humbly with people who are on the margins when we make space for their own voices to be heard. To make space for these other voices requires active and sympathetic listening. The first step in becoming this kind of listener is to follow the advice of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, and "let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

Letting our words be few is wise counsel in our relationships with others. It is also good advice in our relationship with God. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes warns us that our religious words can quickly get us in trouble with God: "Never be rash with your mouth nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you upon earth" (Ecclesiastes 5:2). There are lots of ways religious words can lead us astray. We can use our prayers to God to show off our piety, like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable in Luke 18. We can solemnly swear oaths in God's name that we have no intention of keeping. We can use the words of Scripture to claim God for our own agendas and call down divine judgment on our enemies. The Teacher is advocating a healthy fear of God that recognizes the spiritual dangers of careless or hypocritical religious speech.

Of course, not all fear of God is spiritually healthy. Like walking humbly, fearing God can be twisted. On the one hand, there is cowering, defensive fear that the God of perfect love wants to cast out of us (1 John 4:18). That kind of fear is unable to trust God's grace and can fall into self-condemnation or else into the pretense that our own strength and virtue are enough to sustain us. A healthy fear of God, on the other hand, accompanies our efforts to walk humbly. As the Teacher reminds us, God is in heaven and we are on earth. To walk humbly is to remember this basic distinction and not speak as though we had a God's-eye view of things. Even those who have earned a Master of Divinity degree will never master Divinity. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8–9).

In our relationship with God, listening is more important than speaking. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer urges in his book *Life Together*, "we are silent early in the morning because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to bed because the last word also belongs to God. . . . The silence of the Christian is listening silence."⁸ We are more likely to have



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7. Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 127–28.

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 85.


the right words to speak to God or about God if we have first practiced a listening silence. Walking humbly does not require many words.

CONCLUSION


Jesus' desire is for us to have life, and to have it abundantly (John 10:10). We might fantasize that having abundant life would mean enjoying God-like power and wisdom. Instead, it means embracing the humble truth about ourselves: we are not God, and no other human person or system can claim to be God either. Abundant life will not come by idolizing others or by claiming divine prerogatives for ourselves. Instead, it comes by giving God alone our full trust and allegiance. In practice, this looks like:

- Living as God's beloved, dependent earth creatures
- Trusting God's call on our lives, even in the face of oppression and criticism
- Continuing to grow in our faith, learning from the many teachers God puts in our path
- Giving priority to listening over speaking in our walk of faith

It sounds paradoxical, but walking humbly is the path to God's promise of abundant life.



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ABOUT THE WRITER

Amy Plantinga Pauw is Henry P. Mobley Jr. Professor of Doctrinal Theology at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, where she has taught since 1990. She is general editor for *Belief*, a 36-volume theological commentary series and a contributor to *Feasting on the Word*, *Feasting on the Gospels*, and *Connections* lectionary commentaries for preaching and worship. Her most recent book is *Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology*, and she is currently at work on a project in theological aesthetics.

