

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

John Dickson. *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. 196 pp. Hbk. ISBN 0310328629.

John Dickson is a senior research fellow of the Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, and co-founder and director of the Centre for Public Christianity. His previous works deal with the relevance of Jesus for the modern world.

This compact volume is a recommendation of the virtue of humility especially to those in leadership positions. Dickson defines humility as “the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself” or more briefly, “a willingness to hold power in service of others” (p. 24). His thesis is that “the most influential and inspiring people are often marked by humility” (p. 19). The difference between a good leader and a truly great leader is the humility displayed by the great.

Dickson starts his argument by demonstrating that humility is logically necessary because of the limitations of human nature. It is also aesthetically attractive and beautiful. He then shows that the honor-shame culture of the ancient Greco-Roman world viewed humility as degrading weakness. Love of honor was a virtue, leading people to behave in ways that would bring honor from others, and to proclaim their merits publicly so that they would receive the honor due them. Historically, Western civilization eventually embraced humility as admirable through the influence of the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Subsequent chapters discuss issues of interest to leaders: why humility generates abilities (it allows you to consider and learn new things); how our character (especially humility) determines

influence (citing Aristotle *On Rhetoric*); how humility lifts and inspires those around us; and why humility is better than mere tolerance at providing harmony in human relations. The final chapter contains suggestions for improving one's humility.

The chapter on humility and tolerance is especially interesting. Dickson follows G. K. Chesterton in saying that tolerance advocates a watering down of conviction that denies the existence of truth or even reality. Humility, on the other hand, can hold firmly to convictions yet treat those who do not agree with kindness and respect.

This book is well written, not too long, and a pleasure to read. It is filled with illustrative stories from the lives of well-known and influential people from the worlds of sports, business, entertainment, and scholarship. Photos or portraits of many of the great people mentioned punctuate the pages. Dickson takes pains to insist that, although in the West the influence of Jesus has made humility a virtue, humility works for people of any religious or non-religious background, and some of those he cites as examples to emulate are not Christians.

Although this book has endnotes and a bibliography, it is clearly not intended as an academic book, but rather as an aid to personal effectiveness, especially for leaders. Anyone with leadership or influencing responsibilities (which really includes us all) will find it both helpful and engaging. We all need frequent reminders and encouragements in our ethical lives. This book is one of those helpful encouragements.

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