

CHAPTER 1

Humility



**“The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom;
and before honour is humility.”**

Proverbs 15:33

**“Lee’s lack of pride was his most endearing asset.
He took everyone seriously except himself.”**

Bishop Robert R. Brown

**“In a few words, he cares but little for appearances,
though one of the handsomest men in the Confederacy,
and is content to take the same fare his soldiers get.”**

Peter W. Alexander

General Lee was never known to lash out in anger when reminded of the bitter defeat that he had suffered as Commander of the Confederate forces. The following exchange reveals Lee’s humility and refusal to let even the most callous reminders provoke him:

“Perhaps there was never a better example of meekness under trying circumstances than the simple story of a sophomore who had been called before the president to be impressed with the fact that he must mend his ways or become a failure in life.

‘But General, you *failed!*’ answered the youth (who, no doubt, regretted that thoughtless remark all through his after life). The great man of his day and generation answered without the least resentment: ‘I hope that you may be more fortunate than I.’ ”¹

This battlefield encounter, recounted by a Union soldier at Gettysburg, is most touching and illustrative of Lee’s Christian grace and humility, even in the midst of great bloodshed, affliction, and high emotion:

“I had been a most bitter anti-South man, and fought and cursed the Confederates desperately, I could see nothing good in any of them. A ball shattered my left leg. I lay on the ground not far from Cemetery Ridge, and as General Lee ordered his retreat, he and his officers rode near me. As they came along I recognized him, and, though faint from exposure and loss of blood, I raised up my hands, looked Lee in the face, and shouted as loud as I could—‘Hurrah for the Union.’ The General heard me, looked, stopped his horse, dismounted and came toward me. I must confess I at first thought he meant to kill me. But as he came up he looked down at me with such a sad expression upon his face that all fear left me, and I wondered what he was about. He extended his hand to me, grasping mine firmly, and looking right into my eyes, said: ‘My son, I hope you will soon be well.’ If I live to a thousand years I shall never forget the expression on General Lee’s face. There he was defeated, retiring from a field that had cost him and his cause almost their last hope, and yet he stopped to say words like those to a wounded soldier of the opposition who had taunted him as he passed by! As soon as the General had left me, I cried myself to sleep there upon the bloody ground.”²



“No man can be so important in the world that he need not the good-will and approval of others.” ~ *One of Lee’s personal maxims which he had the habit of scribbling on small slips of paper.*³



“Fame which does not result from good actions and achievements for the good of the whole people is not to be desired.” ~ *One of Lee’s personal maxims.*



“God is our only refuge and our strength. Let us humble ourselves before Him.” ~ *From Lee’s orders after Gettysburg, 21 August 1863.*



“In the good providence of God apparent failure often proves a blessing.” ~ *Lee in a letter to George W. Jones, 22 March 1869.*



“You see what a poor sinner I am, and how unworthy to possess what was given me: for that reason it has been taken away.” ~ *Lee to one of his daughters, 25 December 1861.*



“I am alone to blame . . . a younger and more abler man than myself can readily be obtained.” ~ *Lee to Jefferson Davis after Gettysburg, 8 August 1864.*



“O, that I were more worthy and more thankful for all that He has done and continues to do for me!” ~ *Lee to his wife, 22 December 1861.*



“It is necessary we should be humble and taught to be less boastful, less selfish, and more devoted to right and justice to all the world.” ~ *Lee to his wife, 8 February 1862.*



“If our people would only cease from vain self-boasting and adulation, how strong would be my belief in final success and happiness to our country.” ~ *Lee to his wife, Christmas 1862.*



“There are but few who desire to read a true history of themselves.” ~ *General Lee in a letter to Edward A. Palmer, 26 September 1866.*



“I do not care for display. The rank of Colonel is about as high as I ought ever to have gotten.” ~ *General Lee’s response when asked why he did not wear the full insignia of his rank.*



“I have a great reluctance to appear before the public in any manner. I think no good would result from it.” ~ *General Lee in a letter to a Petersburg, Virginia lady, 21 May 1867.*



“I notice...that my mistakes are never told me until it is too late.” ~ *General Lee after Gettysburg, 1863.*



“I know I fall far short of my obligations.” ~ *Lee to his wife on the mercies of God, 25 April 1847.*



“My services have been performed alone in my tent, I hope with a humble, grateful and penitent heart, and will be

acceptable to our Heavenly Father. May He continue His mercies to us both and all our children, relatives and friends, and in His own good time unite us in His worship, if not on earth, forever in Heaven.” ~ *Lee to his wife, 12 April 1857.*



“I...feel more humbled by the praise of my friends (knowing how little I merit it) than the censure of my enemies.” ~ *General Lee to the Honorable James M. Mason, 3 March 1870.*



“It matters little what they may do to me. I am old and have but a short time to live anyhow.” ~ *Lee’s reaction to being indicted for treason and rebellion.*



“I endeavored to give thanks to our Heavenly Father for all His mercies to me, for his preservation of me through all the dangers I have passed, and all the blessings he has bestowed upon me, for I know I fell far short of my obligations.” ~ *Lee to son Custis from the battlefield in Mexico.*



“I find it so hard to try to keep one poor sinner’s heart in the right way, that it seems presumptuous to try to help others.” ~ *Lee to a friend on the duty to help others.*



“I hope my friends will give themselves no annoyance on my account, or any concern about the distribution of favors.” ~ *Lee’s thoughts on his own promotion during the Mexican War.*



“I am looking for some little quiet house in the woods

where I can procure shelter and my daily bread, if permitted by the victor.” ~ *Lee to General Long after Appomattox.*



“I know of nothing good I could tell you of myself.” ~ *Lee’s response to a requested interview for a biography.*



“Reverses were necessary to make us brace ourselves for the work before us.” ~ *Lee to one of his daughters, 26 February 1862.*



“I tremble for our country when I hear of confidence expressed in me. I know too well my weakness, and that our only hope is in God.” ~ *Lee in a letter to his wife in 1863.*



“I believe it would be better in the end for us to suffer, keep right in our own eyes, the eyes of the world, and the eyes of God, and that justice would thereby be sooner done us.” ~ *Lee to his son Custis, 7 August 1863.*



“I cannot even accomplish what I myself desire. How can I fulfill the expectations of others?” ~ *Lee to Jefferson Davis, 8 August 1863.*



“Life is indeed gliding away, and I have nothing good to show for mine that is past. I pray I may be spared to accomplish something for the benefit of mankind and the honor of God.” ~ *Lee in a letter after accepting the presidency of Washington College.*



“The lower in position, the more suited to my ability and the more agreeable to my feelings.” ~ *Lee to Jefferson Davis after Gettysburg.*



“I would have much preferred your choice had fallen upon an abler man.” ~ *Lee upon accepting the Command of the Virginia forces.*



“I have enough and am content.” ~ *Lee’s response to once being offered a gift after the war.*



“Death in its silent, sure march is fast gathering those whom I have longest loved, so that when he shall knock at my door, I will more willingly follow.” ~ *General Lee in 1869, just one year before his death.*



“I have no complaints to make of any one but myself.” ~ *Lee to Jefferson Davis.*



“It’s all my fault.” ~ *Lee at Gettysburg.*



One final and well-documented incident of Lee’s humility is worth mentioning. On a hot Sunday in June just after his surrender, General Lee was attending a communion service at St. Paul’s Church in Richmond—the same church at which Confederate President Jefferson Davis

had worshipped. Reverend Dr. Charles Minnegerode was at that time rector and invited those present to come forward to receive communion. The first to stand was a tall, neatly dressed black man. He walked to the front of the church and kneeled at the communion rail.

One who was in attendance later commented, "Its effect upon the communicants was startling, and for several moments they retained their seats in solemn silence and did not move, being deeply chagrined at this attempt to inaugurate the 'new regime' to offend and humiliate them...Dr. Minnegerode was evidently embarrassed."⁴

As the spirit of the astonished and agitated congregation grew tenser with each passing moment, another tall figure rose and made his way toward the altar. It was none other than Robert E. Lee. Lee calmly knelt next to his black brother and restored ease and grace to the rebuked assembly. Those gathered followed Lee's example and walked slowly forward; no doubt chastened by Lee's silent, but powerful example of reconciliation.

¹ Wayne Whipple, *The Heart of Lee*. The John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia, 1923, 217.

² Whipple, 171.

³ A.L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee—His Military and Personal History*. Originally published in 1886. (Reprint) The Blue and Grey Press, Secaucus, N.J., 1983, 485.

⁴ Emory M. Thomas, *Robert E. Lee—A Biography*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1995, 372.