

Now is the Time for Love

Love is not Proud

Confronting the Sin of Pride

1 Corinthians 13:5

Sunday, February 13, 2005

The Greek philosopher Aristotle called pride one of the virtues. In other words, pride is a good thing. Following the Bible, Christian spirituality calls pride a sin and not only A sin but THE sin. About sixty years ago C.S. Lewis said, “Sexual sin, anger, greed, drunkenness ... are mere fleabites in comparison ... Pride leads to very other sin: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.” About 1,600 years ago the brilliant Christian thinker Augustine wrote, “The whole cause ... of our feebleness ... (and) all the difficulties, all the miseries which the human race suffers in this age is nothing but pride.” Nothing distinguishes Christian spirituality from other worldviews than their views on pride.

Now, some of you may be thinking, *“You know what, I think I’m with Aristotle on this one. After all, isn’t pride a good thing? Aren’t we supposed to be proud of ourselves, proud of our children, proud of our country and proud of our faith? Aren’t we supposed to feel good about our accomplishments? What’s so bad about all of that?”*

Let’s distinguish between Bad Pride and Good Pride. Good Pride is simply the ability to give and receive affirmation and to feel good about that affirmation. In certain families, parents are often very cautious about affirming a child because they might get a “big head.” So the solution is simple: never affirm your children. Unfortunately, that often creates young adults with gaping wounds in their chest. But the Bible is filled with Good Pride. God wants us to receive His blessing and then pass it on to others. Notice what Paul does at the very beginning of this letter (see 1 Corinthians 1:4-5). Remember that Paul is writing to a very flawed, dysfunctional church. In verse 4 he says that there is evidence of God’s grace in your life and that brings forth Paul’s praise **to God** and **for them**. In verse Paul 5 affirms them by listing the “grace” that they have received. They have been “enriched” in “every way.” When we delight and affirm how God is working in the life of someone else, it’s a good sign that we’ve received God’s blessing on our lives.

But the Bible also has much to say about Bad Pride or Sinful Pride. The Oxford Dictionary defines Bad Pride as “an unreasonable conceit of superiority ... an overweening opinion of one’s qualities.” The Greek words in the New Testament for pride suggest either boastfulness or height, as in being high-minded and high-hearted. All of these words for pride have this in common: separation from others, superiority and aloofness towards others. Think of all the images we have for pride: camel-nosed, high-blown, stuck-up, on his high horse, sitting in her ivory tower. In all the metaphors there is an element of separation and withdrawal. I am a cut above you and therefore I don’t need God’s grace – at least not near as much as you do!

God hates this kind of pride: “God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). One day God will abolish all forms of Bad Pride. As we might say, pride is going down: “the arrogance of men will be brought low and the pride of men humbled; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day” (Isa. 2:17).

As we did last week with the sin of envy, let’s put the sin of pride under the microscope of God’s word. What are the marks of a prideful person? ***In particular, how does the sin of pride destroy love and demolish Christian community?*** Let me give you four characteristics of pride or arrogance:

1. **A proud person is easily offended.** He is touchy and irritable. He lives with what we might call a “spirit of offense.” He’s always getting offended, rankled, “put off” by the actions and decisions of others. At root is the sense of superiority: *I’m too important; I don’t deserve to be treated this way; and who do they think they are to ignore, overlook, snub or insult me?* It’s a sin – the sin of pride rearing its ugly head in your soul. The rule of humility and love is straightforward: “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).
2. **The proud person has an inflated self-assessment.** Social science research has proven one thing beyond a shadow of a doubt: all of us are above average – or at least we think we are. Why? Because we’re so arrogant. According to social science research, about 68% of people should fall within the average range for certain traits. For instance, with intelligence tests, 68% of the population has an average IQ of 85-115; 16% is above average; 16% is below average. But what happens? Well, almost 100% of people claim they are at least average and over 30% see themselves as above average. Or when researchers asked nearly one million high school students to rate themselves on how well they got along with their peers, 60% of the students believed they were in the top 10% and 25% believed they were in the top 1%. One more example – and this may really hurt. When they tested college professors, 63% described themselves as above average and 25% said they were exceptional.¹ This is statistically impossible. We can’t all be above average. Some of us are just average or below average in some things. Do we want to admit that? O, no!

This inflated self-assessment can easily slip into our spiritual lives, which was one of the main problems the Apostle Paul had to address in this letter to the church in Corinth. They kept thinking, “Spiritually speaking, we are in a post-doctoral program” and Paul kept telling them, “Ah, actually, you’re in about kindergarten right now. You keep thinking you’re so mature because you have “knowledge” (8:1) – that “deep” insider scoop on Christian maturity which puts you a notch above the immature people who aren’t “deep” like you. You keep thinking that you’re “gifted,” so gifted that you can “speak with the tongues of men and of angels.” Actually, your loveless lifestyle makes you sound more like a noisy gong.” Paul had to bring a harsh dose of reality: you’re not above average; you have a long way to go. An inflated self-assessment is dangerous to

¹ From Mark McMinn’s book **Why Sin Matters**, page 69-70.

our spiritual life, our relationship with God and our connection with Christian community.

3. **The proud person connects with other like-minded proud people.** The church in Corinth was rife with factions (1 Corinthians 1:11-12). They were splitting into cliques along party lines and common interests. The same thing was happening as they prepared to come to the Lord's Supper, basically dividing their group on socioeconomic lines. We do this today, breaking into cliques based on interests, tastes, status, etc. So we say, "I like these people because they have sophisticated tastes like me – in music, art, movies, sports; because they're really cool like me; because they're true intellectuals like us; because they're true Americans like us." And then from our group's high tower we look down on others who don't share our tastes. We hold them and their tastes in contempt. We become condescending people. Jesus mentioned this very human tendency to form cliques based on our tastes and preferences. He didn't like it. He said (and I paraphrase), "You call that love or Christian fellowship? That's nothing but tribalistic snobbery masked as spirituality. Bank robbers do the same thing that you're doing. You're not showing the radical, all-embracing, wall-demolishing, clique-busting, love that God the Father showers on the world; you're just showing your love of comfort and your arrogant heart" (see Matthew 5:38-48).

4. **The proud person has a judgmental, critical spirit.** Proud people are quick to spot the faults in other people. They have a finely-tuned "idiot default" – they can spot an idiot without even talking to him. Jesus was clear about this tendency as well: he said, literally, "Do not keep on judging others" or "do not perpetually find fault with others" (Matthew 7:1). The faultfinder does not live by the rule of "love covers a multitude of transgressions" (1 Peter 4:8) or the rule of "forbearing with one another, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you" (Colossians 3:13). Now there is a place for discernment and truth-telling. Jesus isn't advocating a squishy tolerance that can't take a stand on anything. The Bible tells us to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). But the proud person, the critical person leaves little room for mercy and is forever finding fault, ready to expose the incompetence and hardheartedness that lurks around every corner.

A few weeks ago I ran into another Christian leader in this community whom I'll call Mr. M. Quite frankly, I haven't always liked Mr. M. Through my uncanny powers of analyzing and judging and categorizing people, I have always known that this man is arrogant, stuck-up and certainly not in tune with God like I am. I just happened to bump into him so I introduced myself and do you know what this arrogant, stuck-up man said to me? He said, "O, yes, I've heard so many good things about you and your church. I hear that you're having such a positive impact on this community. It's such a privilege and an honor to meet you." As he continued to praise me, I continued to shrink. Who was the arrogant, stuck-up person now?

Now I hope we can all understand why the Bible says that “God hates pride” and that “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). How do we deal a death blow to Sinful Pride? If pride really is “the complete anti-God state of mind” (Lewis) and the “whole cause of our miseries” (Augustine); if pride really does puff us up (1 Cor. 8:1); if God hates pride and resists the proud (which means that if you’re a proud person, God is actively opposing you); if God will put an end to all human boasting and pride (Isaiah 2:17); then how can I begin to let God destroy and remove and strip away the pride in my heart today?

There is really only one medicine potent enough to remove the infection of pride: The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Gospel unravels the coils of pride; it heals the deadly infection. At the heart of the Gospel we hear this message: Christ died for our sins and God chose you (1 Corinthians 1:12 and Ephesians 1:3) not based on your performance or your good deeds or your many excellent qualities or because you were a cut above other people. No, Christ died on the cross and God chose you in Christ because he is gracious and kind. It’s an idea that’s utterly radical, counter-intuitive and yes so life-changing. “It was by grace that you are saved not by your good works,” the Bible tells us (Ephesians 2:8-9). “God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). This doesn’t demean us, but it does exalt God and His grace. And one of the results of His choosing us based on His grace is this: it strips us of any claim to boast before God. So in Christ’s kingdom there is unbelievable joy, gratitude, praise, happiness, delight, laughter, celebration – but no one will boast (1 Corinthians 1:29). As one Bible commentator said, “(This) removes forever, from every human creature, any possible grounds on their part of standing in the divine presence with something in their hands. The ground is level at the foot of the cross; not a single thing that any of us possesses will advantage us before the Living God – not brilliance, clout, achievement, money or prestige, not even all of our religious duties and efforts” (Gordon Fee).

As we apply and reapply the medicine of the Gospel – that we have been chosen in Christ – as we open our hearts and say, “Thank you for the truth of the Gospel” – as we repent of our sin and turn away from our pride, God begins to unravel the coils of pride in our hearts:

1. **It unravels our touchiness.** So rather than living with a spirit of offense that cries out “Who am I to be treated this way?” we live under the amazement of God’s grace which cries out “Who am I to receive mercy from the hands of the Living God?”
2. **It unravels our inflated self-assessment.** We can become honest, real and authentic about our life. We can say, “I wish I was further along, but I stand in need of so much grace and mercy. I am a broken, sinful human being.” A proud person could never say that. He would shudder in terror. The humble person, the person who understands the Gospel grasps that Christ took upon himself every single sin he ever did or ever will commit against a holy God and so he lives in utter freedom. He can even go so far as to regularly confess his sins before another follower of Jesus (James 5:16).

3. **It unravels our cliques and our condescending attitudes.** All cliques are based on the desire that we are a cut above the rest. The Bible tells us to “associate with the lowly” (Romans 12:16). In other words, leave your stupid cliques, abolish them; repent of your arrogant, condescending attitudes and then hang out with people that at one time you considered beneath you. That’s how the Gospel changes people: now you realize that no one, absolutely no one, is beneath you – no matter how disagreeable you find their tastes or personality.
4. **It unravels our judgmental and critical spirit.** For religious people (like most of us here) there is a special type of a critical spirit called self-righteousness – i.e. “I’m better than you because I’m doing God’s will and you’re not.” Let me warn you: the longer you’re in the church; or if you’re young, the more solid your Christian foundation – the more susceptible you are to self-righteousness. But the Gospel unravels all forms of judgmental pride. When we realize that we stand before God only because of His mercy towards us in Jesus Christ, as we realize that we have no grounds for boasting, we begin to say, “How could I possibly treat another human being with a judgmental, critical spirit? It’s so absurd. So horrendous. So inconsistent with the way Christ treated me.”

The American theologian Jonathon Edwards who said, “Many religious people tend to hide and cover up the corruption of their own hearts so that they do not see themselves as they are before God.” Commenting on this quote, Wheaton College professor Dr. Mark McMinn asks these penetrating questions: “How difficult it is to see ourselves in all our brokenness and pride ... (but) I wonder sometimes what our church experience would look like if we were a fellowship of prodigal (sons and daughters), community of ragamuffins? What would it look like to cling only to God’s mercy (to us in Christ) and to let go of our reputations, our need for respect, and our bitterness for how others have treated us?”

I wonder too: how could God change our life, how could God change our families, our marriages, our churches, our nations, and our broken and bent world if God’s people simply said, “Strip away our pride and arrogance. Let us lay it all down at the foot of the cross. There the Perfect Son of God was not too proud to die for us. How could we possibly live with pride and arrogance in our hearts?” I wonder ...