

FROM HERE TO HUMILITY

A topical sermon on the problem of pride

by Robert Barnes

- Your twin forgets your birthday.
- You call the suicide prevention hotline and they put you on hold.
- Your income tax refund check bounces.
- You put both contacts into the same eye.
- You wake up and your braces are stuck together.

A day like that couldn't get much worse, right? Wrong. It could be much worse. A survey showed that many people fear physical disease, but 100% prefer a terrible physical illness to mental illness. But what about spiritual problem that combines those two? You could have a debilitating disease of your spirit that robs most Christians of their spiritual vitality and mental clarity. My goal today is to shine the light of God's Word on perhaps the most deadly of chronic vices—the sin of pride.

Pride is utter poverty of soul disguised as riches, imaginary light where in fact there is darkness. This abominable vice not only stops our progress but even tosses us down from the heights we have reached.

St. John Climacus

As his plane approached moderate turbulence, a stewardess asked Mohammad Ali to fasten his seat belt. "Superman don't need no seatbelt," replied Ali. "Superman don't need no plane, either," said the stewardess. Ali fastened his belt.

Fasten your seatbelt. This difficult fight against the towering opponent of pride is about to begin in earnest.

Is that so bad?

In the book of Proverbs, for instance, the danger of a life of pride is repeatedly revealed.

The LORD despises pride; be assured that the proud will be punished (Prov. 16:5).

Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall (Prov. 16:18).

Punishment? Destruction? Oh, that Old Testament is so harsh! Surely the New Testament is more generous—right?

You should also know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God...they will slander others and have no self-control; ...they will be puffed up with pride...They will act as if they are religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. You must stay away from people like that (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

You younger men, accept the authority of the elders. And all of you, serve each other in humility, for "God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favor to the humble." So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and in his good time he will honor you (1 Pet. 5:5-6).

At its core, pride is *unbelief*. Unbelief is a dissatisfaction with God (His Word, His will for you, circumstances he's brought your way, etc), instead seeking satisfaction in ideas, feelings, or behaviors outside of His plan for you. Pride, then, is a subspecies of the sin of unbelief. Pride is when we select the object we trust in more than God, and that object is *ourselves*. Walt Kelly's Pogo was more on target than he ever knew when he said, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Pride, this destructive search for satisfaction in our own selves, is expressed/exposed in two ways¹:

Conceit: The thoughts, feelings and behaviors that build a web of **self**-delusion that we are better than we really are—a pathological search for greater self-esteem. Its opposing virtue is humility.

Conceit is very tricky. When a con artist is seeking to bilk someone of money, they first get to know their victim. They understand the values and habits and pleasures of the person they have targeted. That is what makes vanity, a pattern of destructive of self-deceit, so grimly effective. There is no person on the planet that we can lie to so effectively as ourselves.

Vanity: The thoughts, feelings and behaviors that display our abilities or appearances so as to manipulate **others** to a high view of ourselves—a pathological search for approval. Its opposing virtue is modesty.

We once heard about a lady who came to her pastor with a theological question that revealed a certain level of vanity. "Pastor, when I get to heaven, I don't know how I'm going to get my robe on over my large wings without bending them." Her pastor replied, "If I were you I wouldn't worry about that. I'd worry about how you are going to get your halo on over your horns."

¹ The broad definitions for pride and its synonyms are more refined here than found in most dictionaries.

Pride can be tricky, even to the wiliest of saints. How do we know when our growth is being hindered by pride? As Jesus said, “The tree is known by its fruit.” A few diagnostic questions may help at this point, and they can also serve as a means of judging our progress in our war against pride. These are not exhaustive, but they are ones that have pierced my hard heart lately.

Do I recall feeling offended when my suggestions are ignored?

Do I quickly challenge statements that underrate my abilities or question my righteousness?

Do I feel anxious when others can answer questions that I cannot?

Do I feel indignant with those who point out my mistakes?

Do I encourage people to compliment and praise me, while feeling unable to function when they do not?

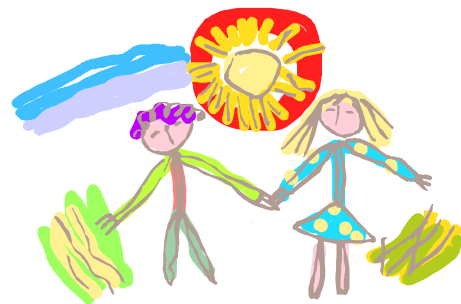
Do I hurry to put people in their place (which is always beneath me)?

Do I flee instruction, especially when it comes from those I do not respect (which is almost everyone!)?

Do I belittle the success of others, refusing to rejoice with those who rejoice?

When you are a child, things appear simple. You hold up your hand to the sun, and when it blocks the rays of light, you don't ponder it for a second—your hand is obviously bigger than the sun!

There is a terrible simplicity to pride, particularly how it impacts our ideas about God. Few of us know how to live our lives without it—like a shadow, it follows us even on our brightest of days.



The problem of the hand and the sun is solved by perspective. If you were to get close enough to the sun, a child would quickly realize how wrong they are. Similarly, if we get close to God, surrendering our own human perspective to His, we will see that there is no comparison between our accomplishments, our ideas, and the person of God. This morning, let's apply God's wisdom concerning pride to three areas.

Starting Proud

The first idea about God that is entirely non-negotiable is that He is *sovereign*. He is in charge of everything, including our own initial experience of salvation. He's not passive, setting things in a general direction, and then hoping things turn out well. He's not wringing His hands, worried that those naughty humans will mess up His plans. He's either in charge of everything, especially the salvation of His people, or we've got to change our definition of "God."

At the start of our walk with God, conceit attacks the central gospel truth of justification by grace through faith. Remember the story of the Pharisee who relied on fasting, tithing, and righteous living for his acceptance before God? The humble tax collector standing nearby, however, stood in pain and sorrow over his evident sin. The broken, tormented, tax man, rather than the minister, Jesus concluded, "went home justified before God." "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:9-14). To trust in our own works entertains an unspeakable risk; to trust in God's mercy is our only hope of finding His acceptance.

The idea of how we are made right with God begins by pleading that we deserve nothing, nothing, nothing from God's hand except judgment; self-salvation is impossible. The humiliating "stumbling block" of the Gospel is that it undermines our pride, our self-righteousness, and steals all opportunities for boasting from us—not only in our salvation itself, but we have no grounds to boast of anything—forever! Declared bankrupt, stripped naked, with nothing to offer God but our sin—that's the beginning of our journey with God. But pride will preclude that first step.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

2 Cor. 5:17

How depressing! Are we saying that people who are not already perfect can't come to God? Absolutely not. God is not asking us to clean ourselves up before we come to him. The apostle Matthew records a conversation that Jesus has with his disciples concerning how hard it is for those who love money to enter heaven. His disciples, some of them men of means, all of them with some possessions that they cherished, ask, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Jesus wasn't saying that owning possessions will keep you from heaven—he was saying that when possessions own you, God can't. When we approach God for salvation, we approach him in desperation, having abandoned everything else—that is the sort of holy dissatisfaction He puts in us to motivate us to approach him.

Salvation is all of God. The same God who created the universe, sustains it, and will one day make everything new now lovingly draws us into repentance and

belief, using His awesome power to give us new desires and a new nature that enables us to love him. It is only through God sending his empowering Spirit into our hearts and minds that we can set aside our pride in our possessions and personal autonomy for the joy of knowing God.

Growing Proud

But even after God has put us on that road to Him, pride still haunts us. The apostle James wasn't so concerned that our pride would keep us from salvation. He was concerned it would hinder our sanctification, the process by which God empowers us to obey. "Humble yourselves before the Lord" James said, "and he will lift you up"

(James 4:10). The context of this promise is the temptation to be a friend of the world, the temptation to be pleading for the approval of man instead of God. James says that God is able to enable us to live a godly life and to keep ourselves "from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). But God gives his grace only to the humble. If we hope for his grace to empower us to obey Him more and more, then we must "humble [ourselves] before the Lord" (James 4:10).

The devil is content that people excel in good works, provided he can make them proud of them.

William Law

The attribute of God that we must understand in a deeper way as we grow is his *holiness*. *Holiness* is what keeps us in our place as we grow into the men and women God wants us to be. And as with sovereignty, God can't be God without it.

Holiness has two distinct usages in the Bible. The primary meaning of *holy* can be applied to man and God, that being, "set apart" or "other." God is profoundly different (though not "wholly other" as some theologians have said) than all His creation. He is set apart from everything and everyone by his august superiority and transcendent majesty. But God can also set apart time, people, or things as holy or consecrated or made different, merely by His presence. For instance, the ground where Moses stood before the burning bush was "holy ground" because God was there in a special way. The nearness of the divine made the ordinary into the extraordinary. Those who are spiritually near to God today enjoy this same "set-apartness," this unique relationship to the world around them.

The second way the Bible speaks of *holiness* refers to God's pure and righteous acts. God's activities are filled with greatness and goodness—there is no evil or pettiness in anything God desires. He never, ever does what is wrong. Combined with his internal holiness in the first usage, we can see that God's holy actions flow from his holy character.

For us to continue to grow and mature without growing proud of our theology, our good deeds, or our position, we must stay focused on God's holiness. But why? How can pride interfere with our maturity?

One of the greatest stumbling blocks to spiritual growth is our prideful view of the Christian life. Many Christians are happy to say that God saved them—they are convinced that salvation is all of God, none of man. But when it comes to living the day-to-day life that God has called us to, when it comes to growing in grace and repenting of sin, we think this is all our responsibility. We imagine that we were saved by grace, but now we grow by works! But while Jesus has saved us from the penalty of sin, and is saving us from the power of sin, he has not taken away the presence of sin, so we struggle and we fret and we wonder why God isn't helping us.

He's not helping because you aren't asking. You are proudly trying to conquer prevailing sin on your own. We never outgrow our need to depend on a holy God for our moment-by-moment power to love and obey Him.

The same God-centered truths that started our journey with God will empower us all the way to the finish line.

Serving Proud

The brash apostles Peter takes the same theme of pride, but applies it to service. Peter says to the men in the church, "You younger men, accept the authority of the elders." And then to everyone, elders included, he says, "...serve each other in humility, for 'God sets himself against the proud but He shows favor to the humble.' So humble yourself before the mighty power of God, and in his good time He will honor you" (1 Peter 5:5-6) If we want to be used in his service in a great way, we must first humble ourselves before the sovereign, holy God and then, with the power He provides, before one another.

God's salvation, sanctification, and our service—God's hand can lift us up to a place of favor, purity, and effectiveness, but only if we humble ourselves under it. The only way up is the way down. St. John Chrysostom said, "Nothing like humility: this is mother, and root, and nurse, and foundation, and bond of all good things: without this we are abominable, and execrable, and polluted."² How can we gain humility? "By knowing God. For ... if we know him, all pride is banished."³ At the very core of our repentance from pride is identifying the truths about God's character that have been taken captive by pride, making it sound so utterly reasonable. Are there other wrong beliefs that you cherish that have empowered your pride, making it seem like a hopelessly powerful enemy? Perhaps. Ponder that while we consider a way that pride impacts the service of the church.

The First Church of Pride

There are many mysterious things in the Bible—and the book of Revelation is filled with head-scratchers than most. But one passage that is not terribly puzzling is concerning the several churches that the book of Revelation

² Chrysostom, St. John, Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles. Public domain. Archived online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>.

³ Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Thessalonians, *ibid*.

addressed. The one that gets our attention is the church located in Laodicia. It's story is found in Revelation 3.

This little church had some problems. One in particular was so severe that it threatened—no, more than threatened—it destroyed them. But what would cause something like that to happen. Bad plumbing? A boring preacher? A terrible fire? No, much worse than that. God himself destroyed them.

The symptom was that of indifference—they were not a terrible church or a great church, just existing. If God destroyed all the churches who fit that description, we might not have many left in America! But what identified this church as one worthy of destruction?

“You say, ‘I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!’ And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17).

This was a particularly ironic way of pointing out that church's pride. The city was a place of significant wealth due to a thriving medical industry surrounding the production of eye salve and the heated mineral baths. But spiritually speaking, their pride had blinded them and kept them far from spiritual riches. And God promised he would “spit them out of his mouth” if they did not repent. And sadly, history shows that is just what happened. In just a few generations from the time of this letter to them, there was no sign of a church in this Laodicia. Unrepentant pride ruined that church.

How does our church do in this area? What would it look like for a church to display humility? First, it means teaching and believing that God is **holy and sovereign**. When God is big and people are small in the church, that church is showing humility. Second, a humble church is a **servicing** church. It is a church that does not focus on serving itself, but on serving the community and the world, on being salt and light. When we are to be known as people who love the poor (Matthew 25:31-46), when we are known as people who welcome all to Christ regardless of their position (Rom. 14:3), then we can say we are demonstrating a humble heart. Hospitality is another distinctive and essential mark of our expression of humble love for each other and the world (Hebrews 13:2).

Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!

Hebrews 13:2

These are the marks of a humble church. The marks of a proud church are that God opposes it and destroys it—let us not join the Laodicians in their fate.

In 1963, John Steinbeck was in Russia, and, feeling very certain of his language skills, preceded to order breakfast at his hotel. He writes, “So in our pride we

ordered for breakfast an omelet, toast and coffee and what has just arrived is a tomato salad with onions, a dish of pickles, a big slice of watermelon and two bottles of cream soda.”

Feasting on pride will leave us with nothing but a slice of humble pie. Feasting on God will leave us empty of pride, but filled with him, and there’s nothing better.

Let us pray.