



Respectable Sins: Pride

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If we looked at all the characters in the New Testament, I think that maybe the most repugnant to us would be the Pharisee in Jesus' parable: the one who prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11). We cringe to hear someone pray that way, but the irony is that even as we condemn that Pharisee, we ourselves fall into the same kind of self-righteousness.

As Christians we all have blind spots – sinful parts of our lives that we're totally oblivious to – and I think that pride, after ungodliness, may just be the most common of those blind spots. And so pride needs to be addressed, because it's completely incompatible with the Gospel message itself. You can't turn to Jesus for salvation, looking for a righteousness you don't have, while at the same time being full of pride. I think that with this reminder you can see just why it's so important that we deal with this particular sin. It really is critical. In fact, both St. James and St. Peter warn us saying, "God opposes the proud" (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

Pride manifests itself in all sorts of ways that we'll never have time to cover, so tonight I want to look at just four specific ways in which pride is, I think, most likely to manifest itself in the life of the believer: the pride of moral self-righteousness, the pride of correct doctrine, the pride of achievement, and the pride of an independent spirit.

The Pharisee in Jesus' parable shows moral self-righteousness. This is a form of pride that expresses itself in feelings of moral superiority over other people. It's not just limited to believers. You can be morally self-righteous in the political and cultural arenas too. You can be liberal or conservative and be guilty of this. Anyone who believes he stands on the moral high ground in any thing like politics, economics, or even

environmental policy is very likely indulging in moral self-righteousness.

This is an easy sin to fall into in the world in which we live – where society at large is falling into and condoning gross immorality: abortion, drugs, avarice, easy divorce, and any and all sorts of sexual immorality. What used to be scandalous doesn't raise an eyebrow anymore – or worse, is even proclaimed as being virtuous. Because we don't commit those sins, we tend to feel morally superior to everyone else. We look down on them with a certain amount of disdain. Sometimes I think this is the great sin of the orthodox Anglican community. If you want a perfect example of this sin, just point your web browser to Virtuosity – the conservative Anglican news website. Too many of the articles there show just this kind of attitude. They don't stop at calling sin, sin – they take a Pharisaical and self-righteous position of superiority over those in the Church that have fallen into sin – name calling and just generally showing a lot of self-righteousness. And if you dare, scroll down to the comments left by visitors to the site – they're even worse. It begs the question: What do we want to see happen? Because it would seem that these folks would rather see the liberals rot in hell than be redeemed.

You see, there's often a fine line between raising a prophetic voice against sin, and allowing ourselves to fall into a spirit of contempt toward sinners. We need to remember that we ourselves are sinners too. That without Jesus Christ, we stand before God just as condemned as everyone else. We need to remember that the Church isn't a social club. It's a lifeboat and our goal is to be proclaiming God's message of redemption and gathering as many people as possible into the boat. Notice that St. Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable about the Pharisee "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt" (Luke 18:9).

So what can we do to guard against the sin of self-righteousness? First, we need to seek an attitude of humility based on the truth that "there but for the grace of God go I." We need to remember that at some point in the past, someone else rescued us and pulled us into the lifeboat. We need to remember that if we are morally upright, and especially if we are believers trying to live morally upright lives, it's only because God has shown us his grace.

No one is naturally morally upright. Each of us has to admit with David, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). When we're tempted to feel morally superior and to condemn those around us engaged in gross sin, we should instead feel gratitude toward God, that by his grace he's kept us from those sins – or maybe even rescued us from them.

I think it can also help us, too, to identify ourselves before God with the sinful society we live in. Ezra gives us an example of this. He returned to Judah with the other Jews who left Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem. He was a scribe trained in the Law and he went back to Judah to teach his people God's Law. We're told that Ezra "had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). He was a godly man who led an exemplary life.

The Israelites he was supposed to teach had fallen into some big sins, and yet we read about Ezra actually identifying with their sin, even though he wasn't guilty of it himself. He prayed, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to life my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens." Notice how he says, "our iniquities" and "our guilt," not pointing his finger to everyone else and saying, "their iniquities" and "their guilt." Especially in our culture, it would do much to keep us humble to do as Ezra did as he identified himself with the sin of the people around him.

Closely related to moral pride is doctrinal pride: the assumption that whatever my doctrinal beliefs are, they are correct, and anyone who holds another belief is theologically inferior. Anyone who takes doctrine seriously is susceptible here. It doesn't matter if you're an Arminian or a Calvinist, if you subscribe to Dispensational or Covenant theology. Because "we're right" we can be prone to look with disdain on those whose beliefs are different from our own. For that matter, let's round out the spectrum a bit: Even for those people who don't consider doctrine important are prone to look with disdain on those of us who do. In other words, this form of pride is a pride in our particular belief system, whatever that may be, and an attitude that in our beliefs we are spiritually superior to those who hold other beliefs.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not at all meaning to say that taking a firm stand for doctrine isn't important. I'm not saying that we can't believe, and even assert, that our beliefs are right. Just as it's critical that we take a stand for biblical morality, we must also take a stand for sound and biblical doctrine. I wouldn't be an Anglican if I didn't firmly believe that the Prayer Book, the Articles, and the Homilies promote the doctrine and practice of Holy Scripture – and I'll fight for that doctrine and practice tooth and nail. But even when we *know* we're right, we need to hold that truth in *humility*.

In 1 Corinthians 8, St. Paul addresses this form of pride in regard to the issue of eating food that had been offered to idols. Some of the Corinthian Christians had concluded that this practice fell within the bounds of Christian liberty. St. Paul didn't disagree with them, but he did rebuke them for the doctrinal pride that resulted from their belief. He wrote to them saying, "Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that all of us possess knowledge.' This 'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). The Apostle agreed with their "knowledge" – but he charges them with doctrinal pride. Their "knowledge" had puffed them up.

So if you're Calvinism or Arminianism or Dispensationalism, if you're view of the "end times" or of the Holy Spirit (or your disdain for all doctrinal beliefs) causes you to feel doctrinally superior to those who hold other views, then you're probably guilty of the sin of doctrinal pride. Again, I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't seek to know the truths of Holy Scripture or that we shouldn't seek to develop deep doctrinal convictions about what Scripture teaches. What I am saying is that we should hold our convictions in humility. If we are "right," it's only by God's grace – because he's given us his Spirit to open our eyes to Scriptural truth – not because we're so smart and everyone else isn't.

If you struggle with this sin, memorise and pray over 1 Corinthians 8:1 – the "knowledge puffs up" verse. Then ask God to help you pinpoint the areas where you tend to be doctrinally proud – and ask him to help you hold to your convictions with a genuine spirit of humility.

Now I want to switch gears a little bit and look at how we tend to take pride in our achievements. The Bible *does* teach us that in general there is a cause-and-effect relationship between hard work and success. Proverbs 13:4 tells us, "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied." St. Paul exhorted Timothy in his ministry: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved" (2 Timothy 2:15). And St. Paul himself went all out in his ministry.

But the Bible also teaches us that success in anything is under the sovereign control of God. We read in 1 Samuel that, "the Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts" (1 Samuel 2:7). We might have the brains to succeed in school or the savvy to succeed in business, but in neither case can we take the credit. We may have worked hard, but it was God that gave us the gifts in the first place.

Paul wrote to the proud Corinthians, "Who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). Think about that. What do you have that you did not receive? *Nothing*. None of us has anything that did not come to us ultimately as God's gift. If you're smart, if you're talented, if you're healthy, if you can work hard thank God, because it all came from him.

So then, why do we boast? We do it in different ways. Sometimes we're overtly proud. Other times we can boast more subtly. Either way, it's because we've failed to acknowledge that success comes from God. Of course, we put ourselves into those successes and worked hard, but who gave you the ability and the desire to succeed? Who blessed your efforts? Ultimately it's all from God!

And yet we often boast to others of our accomplishments as if God had nothing to do with it. We often boast of our children's accomplishments as if God had nothing to do with it? Or maybe our pride shows itself in our desire for recognition. We all like to be told when we've done a job well. But what's our attitude when we do a job well and don't get the credit or the recognition? Are we willing to labour in obscurity, doing our job as unto the

Lord, or do we become disgruntled over the lack of recognition?

There are two Scriptural principles that we can apply to our pride – to keep us on our guard. First, we should remember Jesus' words in Luke 17:10, "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" When we've done a job well or maybe served faithfully for a long time, our attitude should be, "I have only done my duty."

Second, we need to learn that all recognition, regardless of the immediate source, ultimately comes from God. It's God who puts one down and lifts another up. Putting these two principles together should cause us to say, "All is of grace." I deserve nothing, and all I do receive, including recognition, is only by God's grace – so if I don't receive it, I won't worry about it."

Finally, I want to look at the sin of having a pridefully independent spirit. This kind of sin usually expresses itself in two ways: either a resistance to authority (especially a spiritual authority), or an unteachable attitude. Often both expressions go hand in hand. Think of the stereotypical teenage know-it-all. As I've heard it said, "We don't know how much we don't know!" I think most of us were like that to some degree. We had no experience, but we thought we knew it all.

I remember that first opportunity I had to intern in a church. I was assigned to what was supposed to be a moderately evangelical little church over in Vancouver. Yet what the bishop considered evangelical or conservative and what I did were two different things. To top it off the moderately liberal rector was a woman. I went in there knowing that I knew more about ministry than she did just because I was theologically orthodox. (Yes, I was guilty of doctrinal pride too!). Was she wrong on a lot? Yes. But she also had a lot more experience as a minister than I did and knew a lot of things that I didn't – things that had little to do with liberal vs. conservative debates. I was often unwilling to submit to the authority that was over me. I was often unwilling to receive the instruction I needed from someone who was more mature than I was.

I wish I had been more familiar with what the Bible says about authority. Look at Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

The writer of Hebrews was talking about the spiritual authority of elders in the church, but his principle of submission and teachability applies to any situation where someone is under the tutelage or training of a more mature believer. It's our pride of an independent spirit that makes us unteachable or unsubmitive.

It's not just young people – like me when I was a seminarian – older people can show a resistance to spiritual authority and an unteachable spirit too. In teaching and counselling I've encountered many people that will respond to something I'm teaching by saying, "Well, I disagree. I think..." There's no appeal to Scripture – it's just personal opinion or maybe based on experience as opposed to Scriptural authority. Sometimes they'll even outright state that the Bible is wrong. In that person's mind, their opinion is authoritative. There's no willingness to grapple with the teaching of Scripture.

But the Bible teaches very strongly the value of a teachable attitude. Proverbs in particular has a lot to say about this. Listen to these examples from the first few chapters of Proverbs:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments. (Proverbs 3:1)

Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight. (Proverbs 4:1)

My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding. (Proverbs 5:1)

My son, keep my words and treasure up my commandments with you. (Proverbs 7:1)

Proverbs often talks about the father/son relationship, but the point is the principle

of teachability: a willingness – even a desire – to learn from those who are more mature in the faith than we are. A person with a teachable spirit is a person who knows he needs the wise counsel of a more mature believer who can help his growth in the things of the faith.

All of these manifestations of pride have become "acceptable" sins. Often I don't think they're even seen as sin at all. And that's because they've become so common among Christians. They're also sins that we're prone to see in others, but not in ourselves. So I urge you to pray about the sin of pride and to ask God to bring to light any tendencies of pride in your life – and then confess them as sin. And as you do that, remember God's promise through Isaiah, "This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word."

Please pray with me: Father, we confess that even though we ought to remember that you have given us everything – our talents and abilities, our desires to work hard and to succeed, our spiritual life – even what righteousness we do have has come from you – instead of giving you the credit, we take the credit ourselves and become sinfully full of pride. We confess, Father, that we do this so often, that we don't even see it as sin anymore. Open our eyes, we ask you to the pride in our lives, and give us the grace to set it aside and humbly acknowledge that it all comes from you. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.