

## Life's Great Battle

John Ortberg, in his book *The Life You've Always Wanted*, tells the story of Leon, Joseph and Clyde. All three were psychiatric patients at a hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Each of them maintained that he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Each one believed that he was the central figure around whom the world revolved.

Psychologist Milton Rokeach worked with these men and he wrote a book about this experience called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. In the book he shares of his attempts to help these men come to grips with the truth about themselves and learn to be just Leon, Joseph and Clyde. He spent two years working with the men

To try and help these men come to grips with reality of who they really were, Rokeach decided to try an experiment. He put the three men into one small group. For two years, they were assigned adjacent beds, ate every meal together, worked together at the same job, and met daily for group discussions. His hope was that by rubbing up against each other their delusion might be diminished. It was a kind of messianic 12-step recovery group.

The experiment led to some interesting conversations. One of the men would claim, "I'm the messiah, the Son of God. I am on a mission. I was sent here to save the earth." "How do you know?" Rokeach would ask. "God told me." And one of the other patients would counter, "I never told you any such thing."

Probably none of us here today are suffering from a messiah complex in the way these three men did. We don't believe that we are the central figure around whom the whole world revolves. But I believe we all face a similar battle. We want at least some of the world to revolve around us. We want to be noticed. We want the superior position.

Gordon MacDonald writes about this battle in his book, *A Resilient Life*. He says:

"The ego [pride] does not easily submit to regulation in most of us. It insists on having its own way and grabbing 'space' and recognition it does not deserve (*A Resilient Life*, 183).

He goes on to say:

The aging person struggles with ego when he becomes indignant that a new generation is passing him by and cares little about what he has done or what he thinks. A midlife person does battle with ego each time he or she compares life with the ways others are living it. A young adult is dealing with ego when she assumes that nothing is good enough for her (186).

Since the fall of mankind, we have all faced this battle with our pride.

The book of Proverbs has quite a bit to say about pride and its converse character trait of humility. If I were to summarize what it teaches it would go like this: Pride bad; humility good. It is as simple as that. But this morning I want to fill out these ideas a bit. I want to talk about two truths about pride and then two truths about humility that we see in Proverbs. After that we will talk about how we can fight this battle with pride and develop humility in our lives.

## **Two Truths about Pride:**

### **I. Those Who are Proud are in Opposition to God**

A couple of weeks ago, we saw in the passage in Proverbs 6 that Steve preached on that pride is one of the things God hates. It says there that God hates "haughty eyes" (6:17).

Proverbs 16:5 adds:

*Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; Assuredly, he will not be unpunished.*

And Proverbs 15:25 says:

*The LORD will tear down the house of the proud, But He will establish the boundary of the widow.*

Pride is an ugly thing. It is an abomination to God. It makes His stomach turn.

Here's how Gary Collins defines pride. He says:

Pride is characterized by an exaggerated desire to win the notice or praise of others. It is an arrogant, haughty estimation of oneself in relation to others. It involves the taking of a superior position that largely disregards the concerns, opinions, and desires of other people. In essence, it is an attempt to claim for oneself the glory that rightly belongs to God" (*Christian Counseling*, 316).

The proud person's focus is on self. The world revolves around him or her. He sets himself up above others. Ultimately, the proud person occupies a place that rightly belongs to God. And so God opposes the proud. They are an abomination to Him.

And so we should not think of pride as just a little character flaw. It is not something that we should look at and say, "Hey, it's not that big of a deal," because Proverbs is very clear that those who are proud are in opposition to God and that is never a good place to be.

The second principle on pride that we see in Proverbs, which really flows out of the first principle is that . . .

## **II. Pride Bears Unpleasant Fruit**

Proverbs 11:2 says:

*When pride comes, then comes dishonor, But with the humble is wisdom.*

This word, *pride*, in 11:2 literally means "boiling up." It is a kind of exaggerated self-confidence. It is an inflated ego. When this comes *then comes dishonor*.

In Luke 14:7-11 Jesus taught a parable that captures what this dishonor looks like.

*<sup>7</sup> And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table; saying to them, <sup>8</sup> "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, <sup>9</sup> and he who invited you both shall come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. <sup>10</sup> "But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you.*

The proud person who assumed the higher position is brought low and with that lowering comes shame and disgrace. The one who is proud is headed for this kind of experience in their life. Pride leads to dishonor.

But not only does pride lead to dishonor, it also leads to destruction. Proverbs 16:18 says:

*Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling.*

In the Prophets, impending *destruction* was often foretold to a nation in rebellion against God. If that nation didn't turn from its rebellion, a form of pride, God would bring destruction through conquering armies or famine, etc.

God may bring circumstances into our lives to deal with our pride, but more often than not, the destruction we face is a result of the natural consequences of pride. A couple is too proud to admit that their marriage is struggling and so they don't get help when it could still help and they lose their marriage. A friendship explodes because one of the individual's pride keeps her from admitting her mistakes and asking for forgiveness. And the friendship ends. A business person because of pride refuses to receive counsel and recklessly pursues a course of action that takes the company under. Pride cuts

people off from life giving relationships. Pride keeps people from getting help. Pride goes before destruction. The fruit of pride is a bitter thing indeed.

And so we see at least two truths about pride in Proverbs. If you are proud you are in opposition to God. And the fruit of pride is things like dishonor and destruction. If you were to sum it up, the one who is proud and refuses to turn from his or her pride is a foolish person.

The wise person, however, walks a different course. It is the one of humility. Proverbs says a lot about humility, but this morning I want to look at . . .

## **Two Truths About Humility**

The first is this . . .

### **I. Those Who Are Humble Are in Alignment with God**

Proverbs 8:13 says:

*The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way, And the perverted mouth, I hate.*

We have said over and over again in this sermon series that the one who fears the Lord seeks to align his or her life with God. This passage says that to fear the Lord is to hate what He hates - to hate evil. And *pride and arrogance* are called evil here. And so, the one who walks in humility has a life that aligns with God and how He sees things.

What is humility? Is it viewing ourselves as worthless worms? Is it believing that we are not really good for anything? No! That is not Biblical humility at all. Collins describes humility this way:

Humility is characterized by "accurate self-appraisal, responsiveness to the opinion of others, and a willingness to give praise to others before claiming it for one's self." The humble person accepts his or her imperfections, sins, and failures, but also acknowledges the gifts, abilities, and achievements that have come from God. Humility is not self-negation or the rejection of all our God-given strengths and abilities. Humility involves a grateful dependence on God and a realistic appraisal of both our strengths and weaknesses (*Christian Counseling*, 316).

Archbishop William Temple says this:

Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself at all (*A Resilient Life*, 183).

This one who is free from thinking of himself, who is responsive to others, who gives praise to other before claiming it for herself, who lives with a grateful dependence on God, this person is in alignment with God.

And a person living that kind of life is going to experience a very different kind of fruit. Because . . .

## II. **Humility Bears Satisfying Fruit**

Proverbs 29:23 says:

*A man's pride will bring him low, But a humble spirit will obtain honor.*

The one who is haughty will be brought low. But the one who is lowly, who has a *humble spirit*, will be exalted. He or she *will obtain honor*. The one who is so self-concerned about recognition and honor and glory is the one who will be brought low. But the one who doesn't focus on that; who doesn't care about all that because he is just simply not focused on self, is the person who will be honored.

Proverbs 22:4 says:

*The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD Are riches, honor and life.*

Here humility is equated with the fear of the Lord, which points back the first point that the one who is humble is in alignment with God. This proverb says that there is a great reward for humility. The reward is not only honor, but also riches and life.

In Israelite society wealth was considered a blessing from God. In terms of riches, we need to be careful to not push what this proverb is saying. This is not a guarantee that we will be rich financially if we are humble, though we may be. But certainly we will be rich in many other ways. *Life*, which we looked at a few weeks ago, refers to fullness of life. It is the better life. There is a reward for humility.

The one who is humble lives a life that is in alignment with God and experiences satisfying fruit. And so if we come back to my simple summary about what Proverbs teaches about pride and humility it would be: pride bad; humility good.

Is your life in alignment with God? What kind of fruit are you experiencing? Is it the satisfying fruit of humility or is it the unpleasant fruit of pride?

This past Tuesday I was working on the sermon and a number of other pressing things. I ran home for lunch like I often do. After lunch I noticed that the little green light on the dishwasher was on. I hate that light because it means that before I can put my dirty dishes in the dishwasher I need to first empty the dishwasher. It doesn't take that long, but because of the "pressing" things I felt I needed to get back to I didn't want to take the time to unload it. But here's the deal, on that day Cindy's family was on their way

from SC and Cindy had been spending all day cleaning the house, getting ready for their visit. I should have emptied the dishwasher to help, but I didn't. As I got back to the office it occurred to me that it was really pride that caused me not to help. It was very subtle, but pride caused me to think that what I had going on was more important than what Cindy had going on and so I didn't help her. And I was reminded that I've got room for growth. I was reminded that I'm fighting a battle against pride all the time.

I'm guessing that you too sense a need for growth and that you too face a similar battle to keep pride in check. This IS life's great battle. MacDonald says:

*How fearsome it is to even hint that the challenge of the ego is ever fully met. We all know full well that the issue of the ego is likely to be one's greatest struggle until the end of life" (185).*

And so the question I want to spend the rest of our time considering is this: How do we fight this battle and grow in humility? How can we more fully align our lives with God in this area?

### **Application:**

The first thing I would encourage you to do is to **look to the example of Jesus**. We are not going to look at the passages right now, but I'd encourage you to spend time meditating on John 13 where we see Jesus take the place of a servant to wash the feet of the disciples. As well, spend time meditating on Philippians 2:1-11 where we are told:

*<sup>5</sup> Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, who existed from all eternity, took on human flesh. He was willing to lower himself all the way to death on a cross. The passage goes on to speak of how God ultimately exalted him. His humility led to honor. If we are to be like Christ, we must walk in his example of humility.

The second suggestion I would make is to learn to **take the lower spot**. Gordon MacDonald tells of an experience he had a number of years ago when he spend a week working on a Habitat for Humanity project in Hungary that illustrates what I'm talking about. It just so happened that Jimmy Carter was assigned to work on the house right next to him giving him a chance to observe the former president. He writes this about that experience:

At mealtime we all gathered in a huge feeding tent. I noted that President Carter always took a place at the end of the line for the food table. He used the same portable bathrooms everyone else used. He stayed in the same housing that all of us endured. Throughout the week it was clear that he resisted any special privileges to which he might have been entitled. In such ways I watched President Carter trim his ego.

Find ways to take the lower spot. Go last. Take the small piece of pie. Give someone else the better seat. Stop self-promoting. Be quite. Do the task no one else wants to do. Take the lower spot.

Finally, the last thing I would suggest is to **practice the discipline of service**. Richard Foster writes this about service:

Nothing disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing transforms the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honor and recognition. It will devise subtle, religiously acceptable means to call attention to the service rendered. If we stoutly refuse to give in to this lust of the flesh, we crucify it. Every time we crucify the flesh, we crucify our pride and arrogance (*Spirit of the Disciplines*, 130).

If you want to develop humility look for ways to serve and look especially for ways to serve that no one will know about. As Foster says, it is all too easy to serve and then want to call attention to our service. Don't do that. Simply find ways to serve and be quite about it.

There is no lack of ways to do this. Find hidden ways to serve here at the church. There are all sorts of things that you can do, but I think that taking care of the little ones in the nursery can be a great remedy for pride. Go serve. Get down on the floor. Let them spit up on you. Find hidden ways to serve at home. Do the dishes when no one is around. Clean up the mess. Take out the trash. Serve your neighbors. Pick up their branches when they are not home. And then don't tell anyone. Find ways to serve at work. Maybe it is not your job, but clean up the break room. Find ways to serve and do it as a discipline. As you do this, you crucify your pride and arrogance.

Look to the example of Jesus; take the lower spot; and then practice the discipline of service. As you pursue such things, you will be fighting life's great battle - this battle with pride. And in doing so you will more and more align your life with God and His ways and you will experience the very satisfying fruit of humility.