

The Dance of Pride and Humility

Proverbs 16:18 (CEB) *Pride comes before disaster, and arrogance before a fall.*

I would like to speak about something that has plagued me and probably all human beings at some time in their lives, and that is pride. Pride, arrogance, hubris, egoism, is a repulsive quality that is not worn elegantly by anyone. No one likes a braggart.

But pride has two faces: one healthy and one unhealthy; good and bad. The negative sense of pride is what I've just described. It is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, thought by some to be the most serious of those sins, which include gluttony, lust, greed, sloth, envy, and wrath.

C.S. Lewis referred to pride as “the greatest sin”. He said, “Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind....” “It is Pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.”

Pretty strong words, but they were echoed by St. Augustine, St. Thomas of Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther; all taught that pride was the root of sin.

Unhealthy pride is exhibited as conceit, superiority, and arrogance. These prideful people think highly of themselves to the exclusion of others. Negative pride may stem from fear, doubt, and

insecurities, so they boast about their appearance, experience, qualities, abilities, and achievements.

They are self-centered, self-seeking, and are concerned primarily with themselves, their advantages, and what can benefit them. They are self-ambitious at the expense of everyone else.

Prideful people are typically over-bearing, extremely demanding, excessively opinionated, and offensively assertive. They speak of others with disrespect and treat them as inferior and unworthy of their time. They are characterized as unteachable, bull-headed, resistant to feedback, and dismissive of correction.

We know today's Bible verse as "Pride goes before the fall." So as good Christians, we have tried our best to banish all pride from our hearts and minds, and in our efforts, I believe some of us have made some decisions based upon false assertions.

I will explain. Like so much of what we learn from the Bible, it is about balance. You see, pride has a good side, as well as the unhealthy side. Our language does not differentiate between the two, so we are often left confused and uncertain as to how to move forward. If we can recognize the difference, perhaps we can progress with more confidence.

We've looked at unhealthy pride; now let us look at healthy pride.

Healthy, balanced pride is about being self-confident and having a positive 'can-do' attitude. These healthy people view their

successes with satisfaction. The pleasure they derive from achievements, handling difficulties successfully, and serving others makes them eager to take on more of God's challenges.

A balanced pride is represented by a positive notion of self-worth, and is not satisfied with doing anything less than their best. When they compete, whether they outperform everyone or not, they are genuinely appreciative of other peoples' effort, as well as their own. They feel good about themselves and have high, but not excessive, self-esteem.

Galatians 6:4 describes this healthy aspect of pride: *Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else.*

People with a balanced pride can look at themselves and appreciate their areas of strengths and acknowledge their areas of weakness. They exhibit a quiet, self-assured, accurate and realistic estimate of their capabilities. They are pro-social, and they welcome working with others, not against them; this is reflected in their healthy social and personal relationships.

More cooperative, confiding, and modest in their dealings, people with an unimpaired pride are pleasant and agreeable, unlike those whose pride is out of balance, who deal with people with a dogmatic, dictatorial, defensive, and distant manner.

People with a healthy pride do not feel the need to compare themselves with others or boast about their accomplishments. They

don't have to; they are not competing against anyone. A healthy pride sounds like this: "I feel really good that I was up for tackling this, and it came out much better than I could have expected. I know I could not have done it all by myself, so I need to acknowledge not only those who came before me, but those who offered me concrete suggestions when I was still learning how to do this."

Those with a healthy pride don't have to covet the success, hog the glory, and take all the credit. Instead, they inspire others, take their lead, join them, and are proud of others and their successes. They are not egocentric and are quick to celebrate the achievements of others.

These are two very different perspectives on pride. The Bible warns us against the unhealthy side; it is born of the ego, fear, and our lowest human instincts. We are to avoid it.

Healthy pride is born of Christ, love, empathy, and compassion. It is to be embraced. We do not have to quash this type of pride when we see it in our ourselves or our children. It is all about balance. We can praise the efforts of others and allow them to feel a sense of pride, just as we can accept the praise of others and feel pride in our accomplishments. This is healthy. This is allowing the flow of Spirit so that we are inspired to do more in service to God. When we attempt to kill good pride in others, we are inadvertently inhibiting their capacity to accomplish God's will.

We just need the wisdom to differentiate.

If we recognize unhealthy pride in ourselves, then we can move into prayer and attempt to counter that negative pride with humility. Humility is the quality of being humble. It is being ‘selfless’ and self-restrained. John R.W. Stott wrote: “Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend.”

Please know that we all suffer from pride, negative pride, at some point. There is a constant dance between pride and humility. When we have exalted ourselves in pride, God does not want to punish us and bring us low; He forgives us and wants to restore us. In James 4:10 we are told: *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.* Pride may be the root of all sin, but as John Chrysostom said, “Humility is the root, mother, nurse, foundation, and bond of all virtue.”

Humility is a virtue; pride is not. Humility is exhibited by secure, strong, and loving individuals. Pride erupts when they feel weak, insecure and afraid.

A humble leader is a confident leader, knowing who they are and what they do. A prideful leader is an overconfident leader trying to convince other people that they are good enough to be doing what they are doing. The most humble people we know don’t have to prove themselves or hide something. It doesn’t even cross their minds. The most prideful people we know are always proving themselves and hiding something.

Humility is attractive. It makes people want to follow.

Pride is obnoxious and repulsive. It causes people to flee.

A humble person understands themselves, what they can do well and cannot do well. Humble people are not afraid to take constructive criticism or counsel; they are responsive to God, themselves and others. Proud people are resistant. Everyone else is the problem.

And like pride, there is a balance. We can be 'too humble'. When this is the case we are self-deprecating, have low-self esteem, and in general think poorly of ourselves. This is not being humble; this is being self-defeating. This is not a virtue.

Being humble is to think, "It is the Father in me who does the works." It is not, "I am a worthless failure, and can't do anything right." Feeling unworthy and inferior is not humility. Humility is similar in this regard to healthy pride: it is having a balanced view of our self and a good understanding of our personal strengths and weaknesses. It is having a positive perspective on our role and position in the wider community and society.

Humility is not being timid, and hiding in fear. It is knowing that with God all things are possible. It is clinging to love and faithfulness, and not leaning on our own understanding. Humility is not being about us. Philippians 2:3 teaches us to "*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.*"

The genuinely humble are not people-pleasers; they treat everyone, regardless of their status, position, or opinion, with respect, care, and concern. They are not trying to win admiration or approval, because that would be prideful. Still, they will gracefully accept praise, appreciation and approval when it is freely given.

So the dance continues – between pride and humility, between our spiritual and human natures, between light and dark. I pray that we can be still enough, open enough, and responsive enough to hear and feel God’s guidance.

Let us pray...