

Luke 9:46-50
Pride and Prejudice

No sin is so deeply rooted in our own nature as that of pride. It claims as its victims rich and poor, popular and ignored, learned and uneducated. Nothing comes more naturally to us. Self-centeredness and self-advancement are inherent parts of our nature. It is the sin that brought about the fall, and it is at the root of every sin we commit, for in any sin we are really setting ourselves up to be God - and what can be more prideful than that.

Beginning with Adam, man has tried to be God, and this sin of pride has underlay all of human history. Wars have been fought and kingdoms overthrown because of pride. On a more personal scale, lives have been ruined and families devastated because of the sin of pride. Each of us can recall times where we have been our own worst enemy because of pride.

The only antidote for pride is the process of sanctification. As we submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit, we can begin to overcome the natural inclinations of our self. This is never easy, nor is it ever finished. These lessons from the disciples can remind us of that. Even after this rebuke the disciples would not learn. Remarkably, during their last meal with Jesus, the disciples still struggled with pride. Luke wrote that Jesus said “²²for indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!” ²³And they began to discuss among themselves which one of them it might be who was going to do this thing” (Luke 22:22-23). It would be impossible to believe such callousness, if we did not know it to be all too true for each of us.

And we are prideful even though God promises blessings to the humble. He promises to:

Strengthen them, “O Lord, You have heard the desire of the humble;
You will strengthen their heart, You will incline Your ear” (Psalm 10:17).

Teach them, “He leads the humble in justice,
And He teaches the humble His way” (Psalm 25:9)

Give them grace, “Though He scoffs at the scoffers,
Yet He gives grace to the afflicted” (Proverbs 3:34).

Revive them, “For thus says the high and exalted One
Who lives forever, whose name is Holy,
‘I dwell on a high and holy place,
And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly
And to revive the heart of the contrite’” (Isaiah 57:15).

Bless them, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

Exalt them, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

The disciples had no excuse. Jesus had modeled great humility. He was “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). The deepest and most profound description of His humility is found in Philippians 2:6-8, “⁶although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found

in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Pride must be a very deep and pervasive sin to withstand such an example as that.

Context

This passage records the last of the interactions of Jesus in Galilee. Beginning with the following passage, Luke will record the life of Jesus on His journey to Jerusalem and the ministry Judea preceding His passion.

Mark 9:33 informs us that Jesus is in Capernaum, which had been the base for His Galilean ministry. The events took place in a house at which Jesus and His disciples had just arrived. Was this perhaps Peter’s house? Could it have been one of Peter’s own children that Jesus used as an illustration?

The theme of this passage is pride. The first verses discuss a controversy among the disciples where they were arguing which of them ought to be the greatest. In the second part of the passage, John has rebuked a person who was not a member of the group even though he was furthering the cause of Christ.

Pride

As the disciples were making their way to the town of Capernaum, “an argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest” (v. 46). Though Jesus had just finished talking to them about His upcoming death, “the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men” (Luke 9:44), these men were focused on themselves. Clearly “they did not understand this statement” (Luke 9:45). Jesus is describing the ultimate self-sacrifice, and these disciples are quarreling over position in a kingdom they do not even fully understand nor appreciate.

This was more than just disciples behaving badly. In human terms, this was potentially disastrous for the future Church. Soon, Jesus was to leave these men as the ones responsible for sharing the truth of the kingdom of God. It would be their job to preach and recruit new members to the faith. However, instead of being united in an unfriendly world, they were setting themselves for division and dissolution. How blindly ambitious had these lowly fishermen become. Thinking that the kingdom of God was about to be inaugurated, they began to jockey for position among themselves.

There are many reasons pride is the worst of sins, but I will highlight just two. First, pride is never helpful to relationships. As happened to the Corinthian church, pride led to division,. Paul reminded them that such behavior was simply not appropriate for a child of God when he wrote, “for since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?” (1 Corinthians 3:3). And pride never has the support of the Lord. It is chillingly written in Proverbs, that “everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord; assuredly, he will not be unpunished” (Proverbs 16:5).

Second, pride changes our perspective. The disciples were wondering “which of them might be the greatest” (v. 46). They were probably comparing accomplishments from the recent preaching and healing tour on which Jesus had sent them. It was a classic example of spiritual immaturity. They wanted praise for what God had done. Again as Paul reminded the Corinthians, people who “measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding”

(2 Corinthians 10:12). Pride compels us to justify our behavior by finding others who are further from God than we are, rather than to measure our spiritual growth against a holy and perfect God.

Jesus knew “what they were thinking in their heart” (v. 47). How well Jesus knew the hearts of men. Even in His humanity He was not fooled. Mark’s account says that “when He was in the house, He began to question them, ‘what were you discussing on the way?’” (Mark 9:33). The disciples, no doubt embarrassed at being caught out, “kept silent” (Mark 9:34). Matthew suggests that the disciples tried to get out of the uncomfortable situation by having Jesus decide the issue, “at that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, ‘who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’” (Matthew 18:1).

He had asked what they were talking about, but He didn’t need to be told. His divine omniscience was allowed to overcome His human limitations in this case. This was not a singular incident. Remember that when He healed the paralytic, He knew what the Pharisees were thinking (Luke 5:22). And when the woman of disputed character washed His feet with her tears and anointed Him with perfume, He knew what Simon the Pharisee was thinking (Luke 7:39-40). Fully human yet fully God, at times Jesus was permitted the use of His divine attributes.

Jesus understood that the disciples had a heart problem. In the ancient world the heart referred to the seat of understanding, as well as emotion. That pride was the cause and not a symptom is evidenced by Scripture, which is very clear on the power of a sinful heart in a person, “the good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart” (Luke 6:45). Our outward actions and words are mere indications of the heart within us. Quarreling about place in the kingdom of God was a sign that the disciples’ hearts were not in the right place.

Jesus immediately addressed the problem. He “took a child and stood him by His side” (v. 47). Then He said “whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great” (v. 48). Matthew’s account adds that He said “³truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4).

Like any excellent teacher, Jesus used what was at hand. He improvised according to the needs of the moment. The disciples needed to see an example of on what the kingdom of God truly based its values, and He used a small child to illustrate His point. The attribute Jesus was identifying was the unpretentious, trusting nature of children.

Jesus was emphasizing that rank was irrelevant among God’s people. Humble awareness of who they were and all that God had done for them was what was needed by the disciples. Their achievements were, or ought to be, “counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Philippians 3:7).

But this is not only about becoming like a little child. Jesus’ point was also about how we treat others, Jesus was pointing out that such an attitude as the disciples projected rejected God, Himself. If one was too proud to value a child, then he had rejected Jesus, and the God Who sent Him. Much is going on

here, and it is not clear that the disciples fully understood at this time the implications of what Jesus was saying. Jesus was emphasizing His unity with His followers. As Paul later wrote, “but the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” (1 Corinthians 6:17). But even more than that, Jesus was emphasizing His deity. John recorded Jesus as telling His disciples that “he who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:23) and announcing to the furious Jews “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

The little child symbolized any believer. To reject a fellow believer was to reject Christ and, by implication, God the Father. This was the point Jesus emphasized when He said, “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). His point was straightforward. How believers treat one another is how they treat the Son, and the Father Who sent Him. One last passage drives this home, “⁴¹Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; ⁴³I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ ⁴⁴Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ ⁴⁵Then He will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’” (Matthew 25:41-45).

Pride causes people to look down on others, push their own agendas, and emphasize their own accomplishments. It is contrary to what God commands. It is contrary to what God blesses. Scripture commands us to “³do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). Indeed, we are promised that if we “humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord . . . He will exalt you.” (James 4:10).

Prejudice

Hoping to improve the situation, “John answered and said, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us’” (v. 49).

We are not certain what John was trying to accomplish in this. Perhaps he was merely trying to change the subject. Perhaps he was hoping to gain the approval of Jesus for something well done and shift the conversation from a rebuke to a praise. Perhaps he was genuinely convicted by what Jesus had just said and was truly wondering if he had done the right thing.

There is much we do not know about this man. We do not know who the man was or why he was not among the followers of Jesus. Had he been one of those who had followed and listened and learned and eventually went out on his own to practice what he had believed? We simply are not given those details. But we do know that he did good works and gave Jesus the glory. Since he was “casting out demons in Your name” (v. 49) it is clear he was successful. That he was not a fake or charlatan is clear. Scripture unmasks those phonies without regret, “¹³but also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, ‘I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.’ ¹⁴Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this”

Acts 19:13-14) and “²¹not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. ²²Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ ²³And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:21-23) are examples.

The disciples were guarding what they assumed was their privileged position as exclusive disciples of Jesus. They believed they had been personally selected by Jesus (which was true) to the exclusion of all others (which was not true). We can grant that their motivation had been honorable - that they genuinely were trying to protect and defend the reputation of their Teacher by not allowing someone unaffiliated with Him to practice in His name.

Jesus rebuked John swiftly. “Do not hinder him” (v. 50) Jesus said, and then added “for he who is not against you is for you” (v. 50). It was a simple lesson. There was no middle ground with Jesus. One either followed or fell away. If he were not a genuine disciple, Jesus would have stopped him. That He did not, indicates that what the man was doing was furthering the kingdom of God, and John should support that ministry.

We are subject to these same errors today. Today Christianity is fragmented into thousands of denominations. Some of the differences involve significant theological issues, while others have to do with matters of taste and preference. We are to use discernment, of course, but we ought not to assume that we possess the right to define orthodox Christianity. Scripture alone can do that. And as we interpret Scripture to the best of our ability let us always remember that we are fallen, failed people who are subject to error. Anything else is pride. We simply cannot think we possess a monopoly of wisdom and godliness. We cannot be so close-minded.

May we proclaim with Paul, “only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice” (Philippians 1:18)

Take Aways

Do we really, truly see ourselves as miserable sinners? Do we really, truly consider others greater than ourselves?