

Has anyone ever told you, you were prideful, or that you wrestled with pride?

If you have never had anyone say that to you, allow me to be the first? ☺
The question is not. “Do you and I wrestle with pride?” The question is, “In what ways do we wrestle with it?”

I know this might seem initially offensive to you. But, let me explain why I am saying this. To be human is to wrestle with a sin nature. And as far back as the early church fathers, pride was understood to be the root system of the tree upon which all other vices grew. So, while you may not display some of the classic symptoms of pride, pride works it poisonous self out in all sorts of different and often subtle ways. Every other sinful vice known to mankind has it's root in pride.

So, to be human is to be engaged in a life-long learning about the ways pride might be trying to display itself and seeking to cultivate humility as the antidote for pride's poison in your life.

[Transition] – Today, we're going to look at another parable of Jesus. Parables are stories with intent. A parable's purpose is to be compelling and interesting. They are designed to engage listeners, create reflection, and move you to action.

They also reveal who God is and how he acts, and they show us what humanity is and what humanity should and could become.

One of the major problems of Christians in our culture today is our passivity. The parables seek to compel us—for Christ's sake literally—to do something!¹

¹ Snodgrass, Klyne R. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. 2008. 8-10.

And today, our parable is a refresher in the poison of pride, and how humility serves as an antidote. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 18:9.

The reason for the parable

Right out of the gate, Luke tells us what motivates Jesus to share this parable. Luke's comment reveals two classic symptoms or practices of pride.

1. Unrealistic confidence in one's own righteousness.
2. Unrealistic confidence in one's own judgement resulting in scorning of others.

Keep in mind, pride has a signature move. It deceives it's host. Because of this, we are often unable to see it in ourselves without the help of outside feedback. We need the truth of Bible, the work of the Holy Spirit, or the input of a friend to raise our awareness of its presence in us.

Apparently, there were some who were struggling with this. They held an unrealistic confidence in how good of a person they were. They looked at their own performance in life and felt that it was impressive, and that God would be impressed as well and reward them for that impressive performance.

In fact, they felt so good about themselves they believed they were in a position to judge others and scorn them for their hurts, habits and hang-ups. This is one of the poisonous impacts of pride. It usually always involves the comparison game. Pride loves the comparison game.

[Transition] - Let's see how this plays out. Look at verse 10.

Two contrasting characters in our story

Here, our parable is set up as a compare and contrast. Two men. One a Pharisee—in that culture, highly, highly respected for their holiness and strict obedience to the religious laws. These guys were considered spiritual giants. They were biased toward respect.

In contrast is the tax collector. These guys were on the other end of the spectrum. They were loathed by most Jewish folk. Tax collectors were biased toward corruption, mistrust, and hated by rank-and-file Jewish resident. They were often notorious for dishonesty and in the Mishnah (the expanded Jewish law) are classified with murderers and robbers, people to whom one does not have to tell the truth.

[Transition] - Now, let's look at the Pharisee's prayer. Look at verses 11-12.

The prayer poisoned with pride

First, notice his posture. Pointing out that he stood by himself probably indicates he took a standing position in a place of prominence in the Temple courtyard, in full view of those that mattered. He posts up in a "dig me" posture.

Second, notice his prayer. Five times he references himself, "I". He's basically saying, "Dig me, God." I am very happy with myself for what I have done, and what I have not done. And he's fully engaged in the comparison game. He starts out pushing others down, in order to exalt himself. In fact, he's feeling really good about himself in comparison with one of the most hated in all Israel—"that tax collector." Ironic. When you play the comparison game, if you look long enough, you can always find someone who makes you feel good about yourself. Right?

[Application] - Be on the lookout for this type of posturing in your life. Posturing in your language, posturing on your social media feeds, or at your office. Watch out for how you might be posturing in an effort to look or sound good to others. When you are tempted to say or do something that is posturing, be still....be quiet instead.

This Pharisee is posturing big time by pointing out he has gone beyond all requirements of the law. Fasting was required of Jews only on the Day

of Atonement. People facing crisis would fast more often, some might choose to fast out of a desire to draw close with God, but in fasting twice a week this Pharisee viewed himself as fasting to make atonement for all of Israel.

His tithe also exceeded the law. There were only certain things stipulated by the law which required the tithe. But, he emphasizing that he tithes on everything.

Here's something important to remember about pride. Pride grows where success is achieved. This is true for every person and every organization.

The Pharisees were actually very religious. And in many ways meant well. They were very highly respected. In many ways according to Deuteronomy 26, this man is fulfilling his calling and duty as a Pharisee and teacher of the law, bringing the tithe, affirming his obedience of the ten commandments, and praying for his blessing.

However, in this story he does not bring the tithe, ask for blessing, or refer to the commandments. Instead, he thanks God he's not like others and points to his going beyond the commandments.

This is the dangerous thing about pride. It can subtly corrupt what is intended for good. This Pharisee made it his life's passion to know God and study his word. But, while his knowledge of God and his word expanded, so did his confidence in his own righteousness.

As pride often does, it emerges in such a subtle way. It masks its poison in virtue. Virtues that are intended to be a response of gratitude for salvation, subtly become the means to achieve salvation. Then the person subtly begins to trust and rely on their own performance rather than on Jesus and his performance on the cross.

The Pharisees pursued righteousness. That's admirable and commendable. But pride then begins to deceive them, and their own righteousness becomes the problem for them. They forgot the only righteousness that matters is the righteousness God provides for them.

Righteousness isn't bad, but when it's put before God's righteousness applied to us through faith, it becomes a problem. Our righteous acts or practices are only to be a response to God's righteousness given to us through faith. When we get the two misplaced, we begin to depend on our goodness to earn God's goodness and favor. That friends, is a dead-end street.

This man's pride prevents him from seeing his own broken parts. And instead, he only sees all the good things he does. Again, depending on those good things to gain God's favor. His focus is on what he's done and has not done, rather than on what God has done for him.

Initially, his prayer might sound spiritual. But it's poisoned with pride. His major error is he thinks he can be obedient to God and therefore be righteous but still have disdain for people like the tax-collector. *He's got the Torah demand down. But he's forgotten the Love command! Doh!*

When it comes to spiritual matters, pride can be very subtle. This guy is actually thanking God for how good of a dude he is. But he's not really giving God credit. He's giving himself credit as he lists his credentials... fasting and giving, etc. Pride has him very confused.

[Transition] - Now, in contrast to the prayer of this very spiritual Pharisee, is the prayer of the despised tax-collector. Look at verse 13.

The prayer laced with humility

As we did with the Pharisee, notice this guy's posture. He does not stand in a place of prominence. Instead, he posts up in the back or off to the side.

We don't know from the text, where the Pharisee's eyes were focused. He must have been looking all around because he noticed the tax collector and immediately got into the comparison game. The Tax collector's eyes were downcast.

[Illustration] - It's interesting, the direction of the eyes is significant in pride verses humility. About 1100 AD, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote extensively on the characteristics of pride and humility in a work he titled, "*The Steps of Humility and Pride.*" The first step in the descending steps into pride was reflected in the eyes. When the eyes and other senses attend to what is not one's concern. It pictures a person with darting eyes and scanning eyes. And, as our parable illustrates, the second descending step into pride is basing your joy or sadness on comparisons with others.

Conversely, in his *Ascending Twelve Steps of Humility*, Clairvaux calls for keeping eyes lowered, and less talking. Both of these characterize the Tax Collector.

In addition, he beat his chest. This indicated extreme emotion. The tax collector's positioning, posture, and body language all oozed humility.

He recognizes there is nothing good in him that might earn God's favor. He's relying totally on God's mercy. He's not looking around comparing himself to someone worse than him, so he looks better. He owns his depravity and acknowledges his need. He owns his complete sinfulness. He understands thoroughly he brings nothing to the equation for salvation. He is 100% dependent upon God's mercy and compassion for forgiveness.

[Transition] - Now, look at the result of these two different postures and prayers. Verse 14.

Humility opens the door to justification

This parable is a verbal slap in the face. Jesus called a man righteous who was known to be unrighteous. And he refused this description for a man who everyone would recognize as a righteous person—one who had done good things even beyond what the law required. That’s a slap in the face, unless you are tuned into the love command. Then it makes sense.

To absorb the full punch of this parable, you have to try and grasp how shocking and stunning it would have been for Jesus’ hearers to learn that the tax collector was actually the one who was declared righteous. That would have violated every bias they held in their core. That got their attention. That made them think. That would have moved them to action

‘Justified’- is legal language which means “shown to be in the right,” “acquitted.” “JUST AS IF I’D NEVER SINNED.” The tax collector’s attitude and posture are fruitful. He has received forgiveness.

His humility is authentic and genuine. And it opens the door for his justification. In contrast, the self-reliance and self-centeredness and the prideful comparison to others demonstrated by the Pharisee, leads to nothing.

Jesus concludes the parable with a promise. “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

It’s important to keep in mind when studying the parables the rule of end stress. This rule states that with few exceptions, the most important point of the parables is at the end. The clincher comes at the end.²

This promise or principle is so central to our relationships with God and with one another, it is repeated many times in the Bible. It’s stated in

² Snodgrass, Klyne R. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. 2008. 30.

Proverbs, it's illustrated throughout the Old Testament, and it's restated in the New Testament and even illustrated in a finale way in Revelation.

This is a truism of life, friends. Humility leads to health in our relationships with God, with our spouse, with our kids, with our co-workers, with our employees, and with our bosses.

[Transition] - I might have shocked you and even offended you at the beginning of this message by letting you know you have some pride to wrestle with in your life. It's not personal. It's just human nature. Each of us wrestles with our sin nature, and at the root of that sin nature is pride.

As you walk away from this message today the question is not, "If you have some pride to work on?" Instead, the question is, "In what ways is pride expressing itself in your life." Each of us have our own work to do on this in our lives.

Let me send you out with a few action steps that can help you identify the poison of pride and cultivate humility that leads to health.

1. If you have never humbled yourself and opened your heart to God, that is your first step. The tax collector's prayer is an excellent example. His prayer echoes David's in Psalm 51.
 - a) Own your sin and that you are a sinner.
 - b) Embrace a deep awareness of personal sinfulness.
 - c) Confess your sin without qualification.
 - d) Ask God for his mercy and salvation.

(If you are opening your heart to God today, or you want some help doing that, let me know by filling out the Connect card in front of you today. Bring that to me, or drop it off at the welcome booth.)

2. Recognize God is not impressed with pious acts and feelings of superiority.

Instead he is, a God of mercy who responds to the needs and honest prayers of people.

Psalm 51 is probably one of the most raw, humble and honest prayers for forgiveness we have in all of the Bible. It is the prayer of David after his multi-layered moral failure involving Bathsheba and her husband. In that prayer, David writes,

"You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one. You do not want a burnt offering. The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God."-Psalm 51:16-17

So, give up trying to show yourself worthy of God's favor. He's not impressed. What impresses him is a broken and contrite heart. Honesty and vulnerability is what leads to life.

3. Now, having said that, don't try and fake humility. It's important to realize false humility is a form of pride as well. The point of the parable is not to suggest that making oneself out to be utterly vile with constant babblings about sin as if God is pleased with self-abasement.

This kind of outspoken self-loathing is actually a form of pride as well. One is promoting self by constantly criticizing self. Excessive self-deprecating speech manipulates others to give you attention, encouragement, and adoration. This draws attention to you and therefore is a form of pride.

Authentic humility involves a healthy self-esteem. It's characterized by an accurate assessment of self—of one's strengths and abilities, with an ability to acknowledge limitations and weaknesses.

True humility does not require thinking or speaking negatively about yourself. Instead, true Biblical humility keeps your needs and concerns in proper perspective and frees you to be aware and considerate of the needs of others.

Humility is so crucial in our lives. Humility leads to health in all our relationships with God, with our spouse, with our kids, with our co-workers, with our employees, and with our bosses.

Make humility cultivation a matter of prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to raise your awareness of the often-subtle ways pride works its way out in our lives. And continue to reflect on God's word and practice it as the way to root our pride and cultivate humility in its place. Humility that leads to life and health.