

“Pride or Humility?”

July 26, 2015

Sinning like a Christian: The Good News series

Our Worship Team discussed how we might talk about this series. “Summer of Sin” didn’t seem to be the right way to go. But thinking about “airing our dirty laundry” and showing our true colors made some sense. So you’ll see that as we continue week to week with the goal of being more honest about our sin and more willing to confess our sin to God and to each other. Yes, we’d much rather look out the window than in the mirror. The shirts on the line are a reminder of both the sin we struggle with and the way we can live with God’s help.

From anyone’s account - whether it’s those early Christians living in the desert who first developed this list of seven deadly sins after coming to terms with their sin or theologian C.S. Lewis, pride is our biggest struggle, our worst sin. Someone claims that pride is “the sin of good people.” We can’t underestimate it. We can’t ignore, and we really can’t escape it.

Now a disclaimer: pride is not the same thing as being proud. Yes, we’re supposed to love ourselves and see ourselves as beloved of God, but the kicker with pride is that it’s worship wrongly ordered. Pride isn’t the same thing as self-esteem or self-worth. We want healthy self-esteem. I want my kids to know that they are important and special. Pride is self-esteem at someone else’s expense. “I” is at the center of everything. We demand recognition and attention. We brag. We think we’re the best.

Pride is a swelled head and a swelled heart. We begin to worship ourselves rather than worshipping God. We become too satisfied with ourselves. We stop considering how we are to be holy as God calls us to be. Instead, we’re wrapped up in ourselves without a true focus on God. And pride destroys us and our relationships. Proverbs 16: 18 is a bit of wisdom that might sound familiar: Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

The parable that Jesus tells in Luke 18 uses a story about prayer to teach us about pride and humility. The parable focuses on intention in prayer and challenges us. Do we compare ourselves to one another and assume that we really don’t need the fullness of God’s grace?

The two men symbolize people who everyone would know in Jesus’ time. Folks would look at the Pharisee for the example to follow—the devout law abider who’s respected. But the tax collector is a crook. Perhaps he was a Jew, but he worked for the Roman government. A tax collector had an area in which he collected taxes. The

Roman government set a price for what the tax collector owed, but then many times, he would collect more and pocket the difference! Nobody likes those kind of folks!

So we're faced with this picture of two men praying and their intention. The Pharisee is thankful, but quickly his thankfulness turns to something more like pride. He tells God all that he has done. How many of us have based God's accepting us solely on the fact that we come here on Sunday morning or that we follow what we're *supposed* to do? We allow our individualistic culture to dictate our religious life. We sometimes assume that our actions solely determine how God feels about us. We think we need to prove something to God in order for God to love us.

Can you visualize what's happening here? Picture the Pharisee actually looking around and then posing to pray. In Jesus' time, the common posture for prayer was to look up with hands raised—different than what we do today. The Pharisee makes sure to separate himself from others because he thinks they might make him impure before God. He wants to be certain that people see him—that they can see how far back he leans his face to look toward heaven and God. And when he prays, he makes sure that people hear him, especially “that tax man” nearby who he deems unworthy.

Then, there's the tax collector. He stands far away from the temple and doesn't even attempt to look up toward heaven and God. Instead, he bows his head and beats his chest in grief. His posture is the opposite of what others do. Maybe it's because he doesn't feel worthy enough to pray like most people, or maybe it's because he's afraid to face God truthfully. The tax collector's humility before God is obvious.

Both men begin by addressing God, but the Pharisee goes on to talk about himself and all that he's done to be worthy—*I'm not like these other people, I fast, and I give*. He offers God a checklist. Yes, he talks to God, but it's more like a conversation. The Pharisee may be persistent, but Jesus wants us to understand his intention and the way he approaches God.

The tax man simply says, “Have mercy on me, the sinner.” Though our translation reads “a sinner,” what he really says is “the sinner.” The tax man comes before God as one who is truly convinced of his sin and of God's power to show mercy to him. He is ready and willing to be transformed by grace, even though he's anxious about coming to God. Maybe the tax man doesn't pray as persistently as the Pharisee, but his intention is true and honest. He pours out his heart and asks for mercy. He is authentic and real.

God receives us with love as we see our need for mercy. God rejoices as we understand the transforming power of grace to bring us to honesty about who we are and what we need to be God's people in the world. This is why Jesus says that the tax man is justified before God while the Pharisee is not. The tax man is accepted by God

and made right with God because he doesn't try to justify himself. He only asks God to be God and show mercy.

When we regard others with contempt and think we're better than they are, we cannot rely on God's grace because we don't see that God's grace is for everyone. God's grace is what makes us acceptable before God, not the things that we do. All of us need God's grace every day. When we aren't humble before God, we cut ourselves off from God and one another.

We can't learn anything from God if we're too proud to understand that God wants to teach us about what it means to live life more fully in Jesus Christ. The Pharisee asks nothing of God, but rather assumes his piety is enough. And in the end he receives nothing. He doesn't ask for God's grace in his life. He's absorbed in himself— not humble before God.

Frederick Buechner has some powerful words about pride: "instead of leading you to share with others the self you love, pride leads you to keep yourself in perpetual safe-deposit. You not only don't accrue any interest that way, but become less and less interesting every day."

The tax man, though, has nothing, claims nothing, and receives the mercy of God. He actually humiliates himself and puts his hope fully in God because he can't set things right on his own. His awareness of his own sin and his desire for mercy were met by God who is rich in mercy and abounding in steadfast love. Frederick Buechner says, "True humility doesn't consist of thinking ill of yourself, but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anybody else."

To even consider humility, we begin by looking at Jesus. He tells us the truth about ourselves and about God. We come to God with open hands, but empty hands. God offers us grace and mercy in Jesus. We read words from Philippians 2 - what most scholars believe is an early hymn praising Christ. Will Willimon says, "Because the Son of God is the one who stoops and serves, Pride is a sin."

Charles Wesley wrote words that speak about Christ's humility. He echoes Philippians 2. He says that Jesus "emptied himself of all but love." Friends, we see our pride clearly when we look at Jesus - the one who had every reason to be prideful about his identity, who he was, what he could do, what power he had. And yet, that is not the way it went. He did empty himself of all but love - love so amazing that it's enough to overcome even our most difficult struggles.

And when we accept that love, then we're called to offer it, too. It's not easy - to humble ourselves, to think of others as just as important and beloved as we are, to remember that seeking the Kingdom of God isn't an ego trip or a power trip, or who's

better or more worthy. It's all about the One who emptied himself of all but love and calls us to do the same.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.