

Pride and Humility

By Dennis Cornish

What is the proper understanding between the characteristics of pride and humility and is there a hard line that defines one as being a good attribute and the other being typically seen as a bad attribute?

Most Christians seem to have a clear cut perspective on this question and more than likely this view stands upon Proverbs 3:34, which is quoted in both James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5, and reads: *“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

However, before we fully agree on this outlook, let’s attempt to define both terms so that we view them from the same standpoint.

Let’s start with humility. In the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, we find humility simply being defined as the proper valuing of oneself and the proper love of oneself in contrast to pride.

Paul in Romans 12:3 teaches us that: *“...by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”* Paul continues this idea in Philippians 2:3-4 and writes to them: *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*

We are not to think so much of ourselves that although we take pride in being clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we forget that we are to come alongside our weaker brothers and to see them flourish in Christ Jesus. This is where we must humble ourselves in recognition of all the blessings that God has bestowed upon us. This is where we must put aside our arrogance and prideful conceit and count others as more significant than ourselves as we give up any perceived Christian liberties for the sake of putting other’s needs on an equal footing with our own, if in fact not ahead of our own. This is a mark of true humility when we become less self-centered as we move to a position of being other-centered. Paul reminds us of this in Ephesians 2:8-10 when he teaches: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own*

doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

One of the points Paul is making is that we have been created in Christ Jesus to perform good works, to be other centered as we turn our concerns and care towards them. These works can be varied from coming alongside a brother or sister in Christ who needs encouragement, or coming to the aid of widows and orphans, in any case, it is God who has prepared us for the opportunities that He may place in our lives to obediently comply with His sovereign plan.

There is no place for arrogance, ambition, or pride in the life of a Christian because we belong to Him. We were bought at a great price for His glory and praise, not for our own.

Those who are humble, who are truly poor in spirit have a good understanding of the greatness and sovereignty of God, as well as a realistic awareness of their own unworthiness due to their rebellious and sinful nature. As they see Him as He is, they are greatly humbled and there is a blessed and eternal future for those who are humble. In Isaiah 57:15 he speaks of God who says: *“For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones’”*.

In his writings, Augustine said this about humility. “...humility is the first, the second, and the third part of godliness. If humility does not precede, accompany, and follow every action we perform, it would not be a good work.”

Humility begins with a deep sense of our own continued sinfulness and those who have humbled themselves in recognition of the grace, goodness, and sovereignty of God in their lives have their minds renewed and they are devoted to serving Him and others. A humble man lives in obedience to the two greatest commandments, to love God and to love their neighbor. They continue to grow in Christ as they hunger and thirst for His

righteousness and their delight is in Him as they meditate on His Word both day and night.

With the above understanding of true humility, let's turn our focus towards pride, which is the antithesis of humility.

We see that it has been expressed as one of the medieval seven deadly sins. It is the converse of humility, with Augustine considering it to be the most basic sin, and that it stood as the root of the fall. Looking to Genesis 3:4-5 we see Satan successfully tempting and persuading Eve that if they only ate of the forbidden fruit that they would not die, but in doing so their eyes would be opened and they would be like God in knowing good and evil. In doing so, Satan was appealing to Eve's prideful desire for a coveted autonomy; she wished to possess the knowledge that was rightfully God's.

Moving to the New Testament we read Paul's warning in 1 Timothy 3:6, when he was writing about the qualifications of an overseer, he cautions that: *"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil."*

Pride is an exaggerated valuing of, and too much love of the self. Pride is also linked to the term hubris, which is placing too high a value on oneself, setting the self higher than all else, including God who is the highest good.

Self-adulation is rampant in our modern world and any thought of the killing of pride, and it must be killed, is an idea that the mere thought of this concept is seen as abhorrent to carnal man. Social media with its ardent adherents, and the ubiquity of their selfies, are prime examples of the narcissistic pride that dominates its pages.

So far, if we have come to an understanding of true humility as opposed to a deceptive pretext of humility, we can conclude that the typical Christian viewpoint on humility being the more virtuous of the two attributes as being the proper perspective.

What we need to caution ourselves against is the facade of humility where it merely masks an underlying pride. One commentator, in speaking of the false humility that attempts to cover our pride, identified this false humility by using the term 'humble brag'

and goes on to say that although this term may be foreign to us, the concept has always been an active part of man's dark nature.

False humility invites attention to oneself whereas true humility is nearly a subliminal trait. Oswald Chambers¹ rightly called premeditated humility "the most satanic type of pride." We cannot pretend to be humble to disguise the pride and arrogance that lies just below the thin veneer of humility that we often cloak ourselves in.

It is vital that we remember what we read in Proverbs 16:18, which says that: *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."* As well as what Matthew 23:12 teaches: *"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted"*, and James 4:10 repeats this promise when he wrote: *"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you"*, again, this is merely complying with our obligation to obey God's command to humble ourselves in every aspect of our lives. The last portion of this conditional promise is that the blessing of exaltation may not come to pass within the timing that we as fallen creatures would like, but He is faithful and will exalt us at the proper time.

Scripture repeatedly tells us that true humility is the key to receiving God's favor and I quote another example from Proverbs 29:23: *"One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor"*.

Robert S. Rayburn wrote that: "The insidious nature of pride is such that men and women rarely appreciate how proud they are, and the index of pride's power over the heart is that even the purest motions of the Christian soul are deeply affected by it. Indeed, it is possible to be proud of one's confessions of sin and unworthiness or secretly to congratulate oneself on one's "brokenness." As anyone knows who has struggled against it, one of pride's most sinister effects is its dulling our sense of appreciation for the kindness and mercy of God."²

¹ Oswald Chambers was an early-twentieth-century Scottish Baptist evangelist and teacher who was aligned with the Holiness Movement. He is best known for the daily devotional *My Utmost for His Highest*.

² Dr. Robert S. Rayburn is senior minister of Faith Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, Wash. And this quote is from an article he wrote for *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., May 2005).

In Matthew Henry's commentary he wrote: "It is a gracious ambition to covet to be really more holy than others, but it is a proud ambition to covet to appear so. It is good to excel in real piety, but not to exceed in outward shows."

Another negative aspect of pride is that it is an impediment to repentance. The more puffed up we are the less we recognize our need for heartfelt contrition, and therefore we will be slow to admit our sin, and if one is slow to admit to their sin, one will be slow to confess their sin and be reconciled to God. 1 John 1:9 reminds us that: "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*"

So far, we've looked at pride as it relates to our irrational mindset when it comes to attributing personal pride to something we credit ourselves with having accomplished but in all reality is undeniably a work of God in our lives.

The only virtuous pride that we can fully embrace is pride that is founded solely in our Lord and Savior. Paul saw the importance of this to such a degree that he wrote about it in both of his letters to the church in Corinth as he proclaimed, "*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*" (1 Corinthians 1:31 and 2 Corinthians 10:17).

God's sovereign Word directs and guides us, and His sovereign will provides all that occurs in our lives. It is our pride in the Lord that is the only pride that is worthy of His glory. It is when we praise God, accrediting all that we have as being gifts that we have received because of His loving grace, especially in the blessed gift of our salvation, that we can begin to experience a truly humble spirit.

It would be wise to take a hard look at where we are in relation to our salvation. "If we have assurance of our salvation because of the doctrine of election, do we pride ourselves in the limited knowledge of what we know rather than in the person of Christ?"³

Has our being on fire for the Lord because of the mercy and grace that is ours because of His gift of redemption been quenched by a mere theological awareness that is devoid

³ Paraphrased from an article by Bill Neff in *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., September 1997).

of a personal relationship with Christ? If so, then pride may have very well replaced true worship and we have become mired in the rut of an empty religiosity.

Kieth Mattison wrote that “we must have a true estimation of ourselves, and we cannot have that unless we have a true estimation of the holiness of God. It is only when we see ourselves in the light of God’s infinite holiness that we see how truly poor we are.”⁴

The differences between pride and humility are sometimes difficult to separate or to distinguish one from another. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he wrote that they should imitate him and that they should keep their eyes on those whose walk according to the example that they have in them, (paraphrased from Philippians 3:17). I have heard many Christians who have said that this statement by Paul is prideful and arrogant, but is it? After Paul’s Road to Damascus experience Paul began to see God’s work in his life and he both based and attributed all that he had accomplished upon the Lord’s mercy and grace. He was now ready to receive the same type of persecution that he had formerly exacted upon other Christians; his pride in his Jewish heritage was now seen as no advantage; and the grace of God that he experienced in his radical conversion humbled him to the point of recognizing that he was chief among sinners. It was that which he had become through God’s grace that he wanted to see imitated by others. His invitation for them to imitate him was not based upon Paul the man or who he was in the flesh, but upon who he had become in Christ Jesus, and it was the grace of God in his life that he wanted them to imitate and to experience as their own. This is a picture of true humility and not that of a prideful man.

Scripture commands Christians to confess their sins to one another with a contrite heart, but if we are not truly repentant of our sin, the shame that we fall prey to is not because we are contrite, but it is rooted in other’s knowing how desperately wicked we are, and that is the definition of attrition, and it is prideful.

Nevertheless, we are to confess our sins in true contrition and repentance as well as praying for the mortification of our pride as it is chief among our sins with each sin being a grievous affront to our Holy God. The humbling nature of truly contrite confession is

⁴ *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., January 2022). Besides Keith Mathison, I need to recognize the contribution from Robert M. Godfrey’s feature article that is found in the same issue.

that it can become an antidote to pride as we suffer under the weight of our sin being exposed to others. James says we are to count it all joy when we meet trials of every kind, and the soul bearing confession of our sins to an accountability partner can be a trial as we suffer under the weight of our sin and the guilt that comes with it. "Suffering also highlights our lack of self-sufficiency and reminds us of our need for a Savior, and in doing so, it weakens sinful pride."⁵

To further weaken pride and grow in humility, we should look for evidence of growth in grace in our families and in our churches, and we should look for opportunities to encourage others. We should also seek correction from others because we can become blinded to the sins in our life that others may be more cognizant of.

In our efforts to remain humble, in the true sense of the word, there remains a dichotomy between the sharing of our gifts and our eagerness to share what we have both learned and experienced of God's holiness and grace, as opposed to the real potential to succumb to a detrimental pride that can begin to well up within us. This is why we need to fervently pray for the Holy Spirits conviction and guidance, as well as needing a brother or sister in Christ to come along side us and to lovingly chastise us for any evidence of pride that begins to rear its ugly head. We must also be willing to accept any godly rebuke that might come and make every effort to humble our hearts in repentance of our sin. We do not want our pride to rob any glory from God, it is His power and glory that we want to shine through in whatever we do in His service. Proverbs 27:21 should be at the forefront of our efforts to remain humble as it tells us that: *"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise."* The testing comes in how we accept that praise, do we in all humility actively give that very praise to God alone, or do we internalize it as our own and swell with a false sense of pride while we rob God of His glory.

As God's children, let us make every effort to vanquish our pride and to humble ourselves, praising God for His glory, mercy, and grace.

⁵ Paraphrased from an article by Kieth Mathison in *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., June 2008).