

CHAPTER 6A

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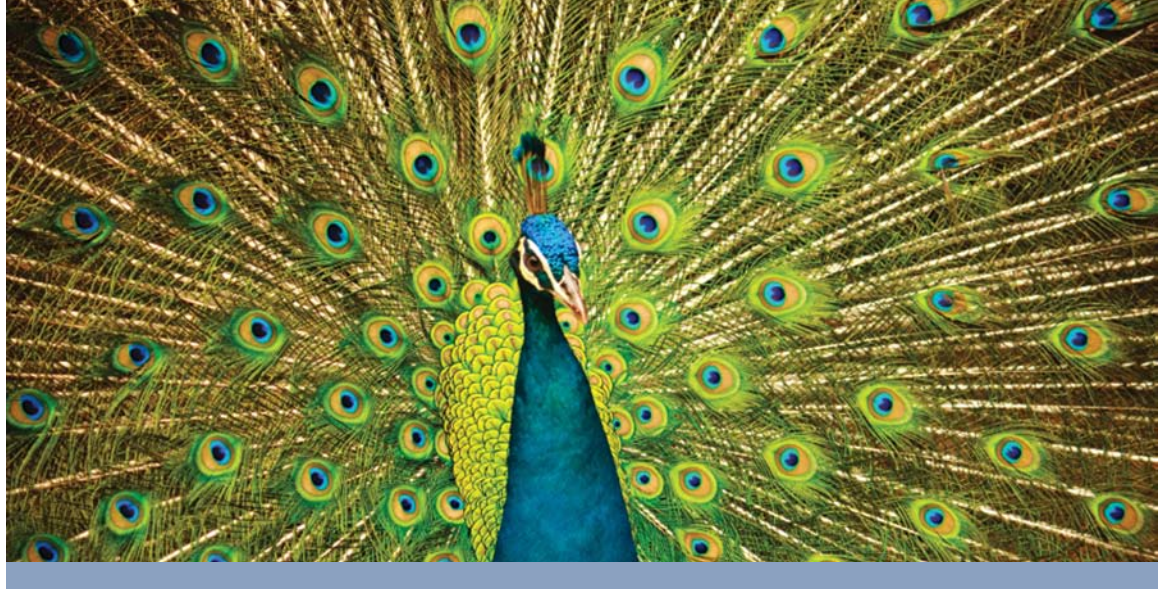
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HUMILITY AND SERVANTHOOD

When the disciples, James and John, asked Jesus if they could secure the places of prestige and honor in his kingdom, Jesus surprised them by saying, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,” (Mark 10:43, 45, NIV). In God’s kingdom, the virtue that is the foundation for all of the others is humility. Jesus lived this way from being born in a dirty stable, washing the disciples’ feet and even laying down his life on the cross in order to save the lost. If we desire to become more like Jesus and live a fruitful life, we need to forsake pride, and embrace humility and servanthood. The purpose of this study is to lead us to a place in which we become aware of our pride, are able to commit ourselves to forsaking it, and then follow the example of Jesus by living a life of humility, serving others.

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“Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend.” So said the late John R.W. Stott, a remarkably humble man of great abilities and accomplishments; some have even said that he made the greatest impact for Christ of anyone in the twentieth century. His succinct statement about pride and humility goes straight to the heart of what the Bible teaches about the deadly root of our sins and sorrows as well as the key to God’s blessing.

Pride and arrogance are conspicuous today among the rich, the powerful, the successful, celebrities of all sorts, and even some religious leaders. It is also alive and well in ordinary people, including each of us. Yet few of us realize how dangerous pride is to our souls and how much it hinders our intimacy with God and love for others. Humility, on the other hand, is often seen as weakness, and few of us know much about it or its resultant life of servanthood.

PRIDE

St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas both taught that pride was the root of sin, as did Calvin and Luther, among others. C.S. Lewis was right when he called pride “the great sin.” It is the devil’s most effective and destructive tool. Why do the great spiritual leaders, Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox, unite around this conviction? Because it is so clearly and solidly taught in Scripture.

Pride first appears in the Bible in Genesis 3, where we see the devil, that “proud spirit” as John Donne described him, using pride as the avenue by which to seduce our first parents. In just a few deft moves, he was able to use pride to bring about Eve’s downfall and plunge the human race into spiritual ruin.

From this point on in the Bible, we see the outworking of pride and unbelief in the affairs of individuals, families, nations, and cultures. People lose or suppress the knowledge of God. Spiritual darkness grows, and a psychological inversion occurs; in their thinking God becomes smaller, and they become larger. The center of gravity in their mental lives shifts from God to themselves. They become the center of their world; through denial of his existence or distortion of his character, God is conveniently moved to the periphery. Self-importance and godless self-confidence grow stronger. The cycle that follows is familiar: people exalt themselves against

God and over others. Arrogant and/or abusive behavior ensues, and people suffer. On a national level, this is writ large in the history of Israel and surrounding nations, especially in the indictments delivered by the prophets of the eighth and sixth centuries BC. Blinded by power and the unprecedented affluence of the eighth century, prideful leaders in Israel embraced a corrupted view of God, trusted in their own wisdom and power, oppressed their people, ignored God's call to repent, and thereby invited his judgment, which fell with disastrous results.

There are also many biblical examples of pride and its consequences in the lives of specific individuals, and they offer valuable lessons to us. One of the more notable from the Old Testament is that of Uzziah. When he became king of Judah at age sixteen, he set his heart to seek God and put himself under the spiritual mentorship of Zechariah. And "as long as he sought the LORD, God made him to prosper" (2 Chron. 26:5).² As a result, he acquired wealth and became politically and militarily powerful. Then things changed. "His fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, he grew proud to his destruction" (26:15–16).

What happened? There are hints in the text that at some point on the road to the top, Uzziah stopped seeking the Lord and the spiritual mentoring of Zechariah. This suggests a lessening dependence on God and a growing reliance upon himself and his own strength and wisdom.

History shows at every point how easy it is for pride to increase as we become stronger, more successful, prosperous, and recognized in our endeavors. In fact, anything, real or imagined, that elevates us above others can be a platform for pride. Ironically, this is true even when these things come as a result of God's blessings. As a result of all his blessings, Uzziah, rather than humbling himself in thanksgiving to God, began to think more highly of himself than he should have and developed an exaggerated sense of his own importance and abilities. This pride of heart led to presumption before God and brought very serious consequences upon him, illustrating the biblical warnings that pride leads to disgrace (Prov. 11:2) and that "pride goes before destruction" (Prov. 16:18). I suggest that you read and meditate on the full story in 2 Chronicles. 26:1–23. The stories of Haman (Esther 3–7) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4) also offer valuable insights into pride and are well worth reading.

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An instructive lesson on religious pride from the New Testament is found in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). It is aimed at those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” It addresses spiritual pride, an especially subtle and dangerous temptation of religious people and leaders. The well-known story of the Pharisee and the tax collector can help us recognize our own spiritual pride. It tells of a much-despised tax collector and a self-righteous Pharisee who go up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee proceeds to commend himself to God, because of his careful observance of the law, and look down with scornful contempt on the sinful tax collector. “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.” Notice in his prayer that his focus is not really on God at all but on how good he is and how bad others are. Here is pride wrapped in the cloak of religion and giving it a bad name. The tax collector, on the other hand, is so painfully aware of his sins and unworthiness before God that he cannot even lift his eyes as he stands in the back of the temple, far from the altar. Pounding his breast in sorrowful contrition over his sins, he can manage only the desperate plea, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” In the Greek text, it actually reads “the sinner.” His focus is very much on his own sins, not the sins of others, and especially on his need for God’s mercy. In a surprising reversal of expectation, Jesus says that God answered the tax collector’s prayer, not the Pharisee’s. Then he concludes with his main point: “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

It would be easy to conclude that pride is the special problem of those who are rich, powerful, successful, famous, or self-righteous. But that is wrong. It takes many shapes and forms and affects all of us to some degree.

Pride can be summarized as an attitude of self-sufficiency, self-importance, and self-exaltation in relation to God. Toward others, it is an attitude of contempt and indifference. As C.S. Lewis observed, “Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.”² The depth of pride can vary from one person to the next and can be obvious or concealed. In the Old and New Testaments it is clear that God will not suffer the creature to exalt itself against the Creator. Pride provokes God’s displeasure, and he has committed himself to oppose it. He has declared his determination to bring it low wherever he finds it, whether among angels or humans, believers or unbelievers. It was pride that caused Lucifer to be cast out of heaven and Adam and Eve to be cast out of Eden. And it is pride that will be our undoing if we tolerate it in our lives. The danger of pride is a sobering reality that each of us needs to ponder. Truly, it is our greatest enemy.

There is, of course, a good type of pride. Paul, for example, was proud of the churches he had established. But this was not arrogant or self-exalting pride. He acknowledged that his accomplishments were the fruit of God's grace to him and through him (Rom. 15:15–19). Occasionally Paul mentions boasting, but this is a matter of highlighting what God has done by his grace, either through Paul or among others. It is never self-exalting. These days most of us will say that we are proud of our children or our favorite sports team or perhaps something we have accomplished. In cases like this, we are (one hopes) saying that we are really pleased about something good and are not engaging in the sinful type of pride and arrogance the Bible condemns.

HUMILITY

Pride is a universal human problem. Everyone suffers from it to some degree. But when we have exalted ourselves in pride, God does not want to punish us and bring us low; rather, he wants to forgive and restore us. He says again and again in Scripture, humble yourselves, and I will exalt you. This gives us hope and encouragement. God takes pleasure in our efforts to humble ourselves, and he loves to bless and exalt the humble. For just as pride is the root of all sin, so “humility is the root, mother, nurse, foundation, and bond of all virtue,” as John Chrysostom noted.

Admittedly, having humility and humbling of oneself is out of fashion and seems unappealing to most of us. However, as Jonathan Edwards said, “We must view humility as one of the most essential things that characterizes true Christianity.” Our perspective on humility can be radically changed if we will ponder and meditate on the greatest example of humility in history, Jesus Christ. By the very act of leaving heaven, coming to earth, and taking the form of man, he demonstrated an unfathomable humbling of himself. Throughout his life on earth, Jesus, as the Suffering Servant, demonstrated a spirit of profound humility, saying that he came “not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). He served us in many ways, most importantly by laying down his life on the cross to purchase our salvation. So crucial was the matter of humility and service that on his last night with the disciples, Jesus took a towel and basin and washed their dirty feet, instructing them to follow his example of servanthood with one another (John 13:1–17). Andrew Murray captures it well, “Christ is the

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humility of God embodied in human nature; the Eternal Love humbling itself, clothing itself in the garb of meekness and gentleness, to win and serve and save us.”⁴

Jesus intends servanthood to be the lifestyle of his followers. Serving others is simply the outworking of our love for him and for them. Following Jesus, the apostle Paul would later teach that “through love” we should “serve one another” (Gal. 5:13). Paul may well have been thinking of the Upper Room when he urged the believers in Philippi:

Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8)

Here Paul is encouraging ordinary believers in a local church, who apparently have some measure of sinful pride in their hearts and relationships, to reflect on and adopt the attitude and actions of Jesus their Lord and follow his example of humble servanthood.

Those who do so will experience what Jesus experienced: exaltation by God. As Paul goes on to say, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9–11). In Jesus we have the “example of all examples”: those who humble themselves will be exalted! And his example is meant to guide our earthly walk. If we will take care of humbling ourselves, we can trust God to take care of exalting us.

How do we gain the mind of Christ and humble ourselves? By making a firm decision to ponder, understand, and adopt Jesus’ way of thinking; his values and attitudes must become ours. His strong emphasis on humility and meekness and his example of it must take hold of our thinking, our desires, and our conduct. We must admire his humility and want it for ourselves. This requires that we earnestly and regularly pray for the Holy Spirit to change our hearts, for it is impossible to do it in our own strength. What did Jesus mean when he called men and women to humble themselves? The Greek word that Jesus and the apostles used, *tapeinos*, conveys the idea of having a right view of ourselves before God and others.⁵ If pride is an exalted sense of who we are in relation to God and others, humility is having a realistic sense of who we are before God and others. We must not think too highly (or too lowly) of ourselves. Rather, we must have an honest, sober, and realistic view of who and what we are (Rom. 12:3).

Again, Paul's advice to the Philippians is helpful, "Do nothing from rivalry 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" (Phil. 2:3–4). Refusing to be preoccupied with ourselves and our own importance and seeking to love and serve others will reorient us from self-centeredness to other-centeredness—to serving and caring for others just as Jesus did for us. In the narcissistic culture of contemporary America, this is a particularly powerful counter-cultural witness of Christ's presence and lordship in our lives.

Truly, humility is our greatest friend. It imparts the aroma of Christ to all whom we encounter. It is a sign of greatness in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:24–27). And it is the key to intimacy with God, who knows the proud from afar but dwells with him "who is of a contrite and lowly spirit (Isa. 57:15). Developing the identity, attitude, and conduct of a humble servant does not happen over night. It is rather like peeling an onion; you cut away one layer only to find another beneath it. But it does happen. As we forsake pride and seek to humble ourselves by daily deliberate choices in dependence on the Holy Spirit, humility grows in our souls. Fenelon said it well, "Humility is not a grace that can be acquired in a few months: it is the work of a lifetime." And it is a grace that is precious in the sight of God, who in due course will exalt all who embrace it.

NOTES

¹See Augustine, *The City of God* 14.13; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ques. 84.

²Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.

³C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1996), 112.

⁴Andrew Murray, *Humility* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, nd), 17.

⁵Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 2:259.