

Pride

Isaiah 14:9-17; Luke 18:9-14

This morning, we come to ponder the sin of pride. But not everyone thinks pride is wrong – or, at the least, that not all pride is wrong. Kenneth Slack writes this:

Pride of family, pride of class, pride of cultural background, pride of nationality are regarded as socially seemly. Some of these forms of pride are even seen as valuable forms of cement for the coherence and survival of society. True, there is a certain ambiguity in the phrase we sometimes use, "He's a very proud man". There is some suggestion of the off-putting about it; but there is a suggestion too of admiration, even if of a mildly reluctant kind.¹

Sure, we recognise those things can turn sour. Pride of nationality can turn into racism. Pride of class or culture can turn into snobbishness. Yet, is the sense of pride in worthwhile cultural achievements always wrong? Can there be no proper sense of achievement in work done well?

Then, a couple of decades ago, we had many promoting positive self-esteem. They claimed we had a generation of children growing up with very poor self-images and developing all sorts of psychological problems. Their cause was also taken up by people in the church. For example, Walter Trobisch wrote:

... our ability to love God and to love our neighbour is limited by our ability to love ourselves. We cannot love God more than we love our neighbour and we cannot love our neighbour more than we love

¹ The Australian Baptist, 1986

ourselves.²

Is this self-esteem movement right? What's the relationship between self-esteem, self-image and pride? Is there a relationship? Are they totally separate?

What is Pride?

So what is pride? If I turn to my trusty *Macquarie Budget Dictionary*, I get five short definitions:

- high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority
- the state or feeling of being proud
- self respect
- the best or most admired part of anything
- a company of lions³

I don't think we'll worry too much about that last one for this morning. I'm not going to worry about the fourth one either. I think it's talking about something like in the expression "the pride of the fleet" – and so doesn't have so much of the human element in it.

I want to concentrate on the first and third definitions.

- The first one has a negative tone to it.
- The third one has a positive tone to it.

Is all pride wrong? After all, we're looking at pride in the context of a series on seven deadly sins. That suggests a presumption that pride's wrong – it's a deadly sin. Yet, here we have a dictionary definition (alongside those earlier examples) that suggests it may, on occasion, be a good thing.

When I was a child at school, I was encouraged to take

² Quoted in Jay Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image* (Oregon: Harvest House, 1986) 35.

³ *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1995) 314.

pride in my work – by both teachers and my parents. By that, they meant I was to take care, do it properly and have a sense of achievement in a job well done. That's along the lines of definition 3 – although it could easily spill over into definition 1 if I compared my work with what others did and built up a sense of superiority as a result. So, is there a good pride?

Interestingly enough, if you look up the word *pride* in the New Testament, it only occurs 8 times in the NIV. Of those 8 times, three actually encourage pride. Galatians 6:4

Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, ...

James 1:9-10

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.

Another two references talk positively of Paul's pride in the Corinthian Christians. One reference encourages the Corinthians to have an appropriate pride in Paul. Only 2 of the references have a negative tone to them – 1 Corinthians 4:6 and 2 Corinthians 5:12.

If we turn to the word *proud* – again there are 8 references in the New Testament in the NIV – and they're all negative. Being proud is a bad thing.

Now that's just a quick exercise I've done on the basis of one English translation of the New Testament. I wasn't looking at the Old Testament. I wasn't looking at the various different Greek and Hebrew words that are trans-

lated *pride* or *proud* in the NIV. It's simply to say, as with my *Macquarie Budget Dictionary*, there is a positive use of these words.

So what makes the difference? What's involved in *pride* that turns it into a deadly sin? It's the wrong focus on self

- The dictionary definition sees that in relation to others. It's when I compare myself with others with a view to asserting my superiority. Or it's when I live in such a way that treats others less than self. You can see it in the words that pop up as synonyms: arrogance, conceit, smugness, superiority, self-centredness, vanity, boastfulness, selfishness, self-glorification.
- But it may also be a wrong focus on self in relation to God. It's when I exalt myself and think I can live independently of God. It's when I think I'm pretty good and God should be impressed with me and what I've achieved. It's when I think things centre on me rather than God. It's living as if I'm a self-made man.

We're good at working out the pecking order. Somehow, we've picked up it's important for how our culture operates. We constantly compare ourselves with each other.

- What sort of jobs we have.
- How much money we earn.
- The size of our house.
- The location of our house.
- The label on our clothes.
- How good looking we are.
- What car we drive.
- Where we eat.
- What degrees we have.

- Where we have our holidays.

You don't have to be at the top of the pecking order to be proud. It's enough that you're making your way up – that you know others are below you. Indeed, it's enough you simply play the game – that you struggle because you're not in the position you want to be – the position someone like you should have.

Christians aren't immune from this – we can have our own pecking orders in the church. Often they're based around giftedness – the gifts that are on public display at church. We rank ourselves in terms of how well we lead the service. Sometimes they're based on spirituality – or what we perceive as spirituality: how many times we've read the Bible; how long our quiet times are; how many prayer meetings we attend.

As I was preparing this, I realised I don't think I've ever been tempted to be proud of how I've put the chairs out – I've been tempted to be proud of leading singing or having lots of Bible knowledge or being able to preach, but not of putting the chairs out. Why is that?

- Maybe there's no self-expression – no individual way of doing it that's better than how others do it.
- Maybe there's no competition – no one champing at the bit to show they can do the job better than me.

I don't know. But I have been tempted to be proud of my humility in putting the chairs out. That happened as a teenager – and I haven't grown out of it. It shows I don't truly understand humility – but more of that later.

Not even pastors are immune from the pecking-order syndrome. When pastors get together, one of the first questions they often ask is: How big's your church? It's

not always that blatant – there are subtle ways of asking the same thing – but what they're doing is working out where they are on the pecking order of pastors. Are you doing better than me – or can I look down my spiritual nose at you?

Billy Graham identifies four categories of pride.⁴

- Intellectual. At the human level, it looks down on the unlearned and illiterate and anyone with a lesser education than me. At the God level, it trusts its own reasoning to solve the mysteries of life – and to get it through the next day.
- Material. At the human level, it compares its toys with the toys of others – the one with the most toys wins. At the God level, it trusts in its ability to find security in material things and good financial planning.
- Social. At the human level, it aspires to reach the upper echelons – to be seen with the right people. It starts at school with the desire to be part of the "in group". At the God level, it insists God conform to our social ideals and standards of operating.
- Spiritual. At the human level, it impresses others with its own goodness or religious devotion or conformity to a list of rules. At the God level, it tries to impress God with its own achievements.

That's a helpful list – and it's useful for further exploring areas where pride rears its ugly head in our lives – but I suspect it's not exhaustive. You can find other categories.

When I was 16 or 17, I remember an experience over a number of days at beach mission. One day God dealt with one area of pride in my life. The next day, another

⁴ Billy Graham, *Freedom from The Seven Deadly Sins* (London: Oliphants, 1966) 16.

area of pride. And then another one. And then I got proud about how spiritual and humble I was becoming – and God had to deal with that pride as well. It's as if pride's this onion – and God peels off a layer at a time. But it's a big onion – and its centre is a long way down in my heart. Pride runs deep in our lives – and we must watch that danger very carefully when we deal with the various issues raised by the self-esteem movement.

What's its Impact?

Behind each of these sins, there's a lie, an idolatry and a slavery. What's the lie behind pride?

- That I'm the most important person.
- That I'm the most deserving person.
- That my life revolves around me and what I want.

Now, I suspect that, when it's put that blatantly, most people will reject the notion. They want to move from the superlative to the comparative.

- Not, I'm the most important person, but I'm the more important person.
- Not, I'm the most deserving person, but I'm the more deserving person.
- And, my life still revolves around me.

After all, we all know there are more important people in the world than us.

This last week, we've had Prince William fever on the news. He's more important than me, isn't he?

- He's a crown prince.
- He gets to travel the world.
- He gets to mix with world leaders – other people more important than me.

I'm happy to acknowledge I'm not in his class. But how do I treat Prince William in practical terms? It's all theo-

retical isn't it – I've never met him and never likely to. But if I did ...

- Would I treat him with deference?
- Would I bow to acknowledge his superiority?
- If he asked me to do something for him, would I willingly do it since I thought him more important?
- If I was waiting in the check-out queue in Coles, would I let him in front of me?

After all, shouldn't the less important serve the more important?

At some point, there's that within me that rebels against that. My pride jumps up and says:

Who does he think he is? Why should I do what he wants? Why should I put myself out for him? Aren't we equally human? Shouldn't we have a level playing field?

In fact, because of his privileged position and his wealth, I think he should be more about serving me. He should use some of his influence and money to improve my lot. And so my pride sneaks through. I think I'm important.

Or if someone gave you an extra \$100 – a free gift that came out of nowhere – what would you do with it? Save it up for a rainy day? Indulge yourself with some luxury? After all, who could be more deserving than yourself to benefit from this \$100? Does it enter your head that perhaps God gave you this money so you could bless someone else with it?

And it's the same with God. Who's more important in God's universe – me or God? Well, it's His universe, so I guess that, in theory at least, He's more important. But what about in practice? When it comes to day to day

decisions, who do I listen to – me or Him?

- Who decides where I live?
- Who decides how I spend my time?
- Who decides what I watch on TV?
- Who decides how I spend my money?

Do I pay attention to God in those things? Am I truly treating God as if He's more important than me? Or do I simply let things revolve around me and what I want? If I think I know better than God, isn't that having a rather high opinion of my own superiority? Even calling it *my money* says something, doesn't it?

Behind pride there's an idol – and the idol is *self*. All sin's idolatry in one form or another. It puts something else in the place God should occupy. When it comes to pride, that something else is very much self. Instead of devoting my life to God and His purposes – instead of worshipping my Creator – I devote my life to myself.

We read that passage from Isaiah 14 before – a passage directed at a future King of Babylon, although many also see it as a picture of Satan's initial rebellion. What's the essence of the sin involved? It's in verses 13 and 14: I will, I will, I will – five times. The centre is self.

What's the slavery? The slavery is to image. If I set myself up as an idol, I have to maintain the mirage.

- I have to show I'm worthy of worship or honour.
- I have to present an image of superiority to others.
- I have to prove myself better.
- I have to succeed in the eyes of others.

It can become hard work.

- Making enough money.
- Being seen in the right social circles.

- Keeping up with the latest fashions.
- Joining the right clubs.
- Knowing what improves my image.

You become a slave to whatever others determine is the measure or success – the measure of superiority.

And so it destroys my relationships with others.

- I think I'm better than they – and so treat them accordingly: they're a stepping stone on my way up, someone to be used for my purposes.
- I want to prove myself better than they – and so compete with them and seek to destroy them in the process: not destroy them outright, but destroy any potential future threat from them to my superiority.
- I want them to bow down and honour me – not literally, but in their minds. I want them to acknowledge who I am and what I've achieved.
- I want to be the centre of attention – the person the party revolves around – and I resent anyone who competes with me for that.

And if the other people around me act in the same way, it becomes a dog-eat-dog world.

It destroys my relationship with God. Psalm 10:4

In his pride the wicked does not seek Him;

in all his thoughts there is no room for God.

If you're full of yourself, what room is there for God – for Someone who by very definition is immeasurably superior to you in every sense of the word. You simply can't afford to look out from your own self-absorption and realise how much greater God is. If you're running things your way, you don't want someone interfering.

But the relationship's also destroyed from the other side.

Listen to what God's Word says in Proverbs 16:5.

The LORD detests all the proud of heart.

Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.

That's not a good place to be in.

Further, pride destroys myself. I'm not qualified to be an idol. I'm not qualified to be the centre of things. I'm not qualified to have everything revolve around me. I set myself up on a pedestal, but the pedestal can't support my big head. Proverbs 16:18

*Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall.*

Proverbs 29:23

*A man's pride brings him low,
but a man of lowly spirit gains honour.*

And, as we'll see in a moment in 1 Peter, God opposes the proud. He pledges to bring them down.

What's the Antidote?

So, what's the antidote? The first thing is to confess we are proud. Jesus puts it this way in Matthew 5:3

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

The poor in spirit as those who know they're bankrupt. They have no resources in themselves. They can't stand before God and make some claim on God. They're empty handed. The things that impress people in this world – nationality, intellect, social standing, education, achievements, even goodness – aren't any use before God. There can be no self-promotion, self-sufficiency, self-reliance or self-anything – not even self-esteem.

Nothing in my hands I bring

Simply to Thy cross I cling.

God sent Jesus to die to take the penalty for your pride.

Proverbs 16: *the proud of heart will not go unpunished* – if you're a Christian, the punishment for your pride was suffered by Jesus.

Secondly, we're to humble ourselves. 1 Peter 5:5-6

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,

"God opposes the proud

but gives grace to the humble."

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time.

There are similar verses in James 4. How do you humble yourself? You've probably come across examples of what not to do – people who have wrong ideas of what humility looks like.

- The person too shy or too cowardly or too worried about their own image to do anything. That's just pride masquerading as humility.
- The person who represses their own personality to become invisible. That ignores the person God made them to be – and usually wastes many of God's gifts in the process.
- The one doing all the menial tasks – and doing it in such a way as to draw attention to themselves: Look at me – look how humble I am.
- The one who lowers themselves in their own estimation to do things beneath their station: I'm really better than this, but for the sake of God and others I'll humble myself.

Genuine humility's not something you work up or a mask you put on.

Two things grow genuine humility – both of which take the focus away from self.

- Focus on God and His greatness. When you truly see God for who He is – and you see yourself in comparison in all your finiteness and all your wickedness – then you can get yourself in proper perspective. You truly see yourself as poor in spirit – you see the reality of your sin. The foundation of humility is truth.
- Submit to others. That's the context of the verses in 1 Peter. Earlier, I started halfway through verse 5. The verse begins:
Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older.

Thirdly, remember everything we have comes from God. Paul reminds the Corinthians (4:7)

For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

James tells us (1:17)

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights ...

There's so much about ourselves that we don't determine: our nationality, our upbringing, our abilities, our talents, our health, our physical makeup. And yet, so often, we boast about these things as if they're our own doing. We use these things to declare our superiority to others. But we had no say in them. We didn't deserve them. They're simply the things God's given us to bless and serve others – and He gives them on the basis of His choice, not our merits.

And so, fourthly, commit yourself to love. Jesus summed up the whole law in Matthew 22:37-40

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with

all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbour as yourself.

Paul writes in Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Pride is loving ourselves more than God or others. We not only need to get rid of that, we need to replace it with the appropriate focus. And so we look to serve God and others – to lose ourselves in the daily worship of God and desire to encourage others and build them up. Rather than working on our own self-esteem and self-image, we spend ourselves ministering to others.