

Pride, Contention, And Unity

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Forerunner, "Personal," July 1993

Is any sin as prevalent and destructive as pride? Is any other sin the underlying and perhaps unseen cause of so many other sins as is pride? Some say ingratitude is the most common sin, but is not pride at the root of much ingratitude? In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri placed pride first on his list of seven deadly sins because he felt that it is the father of all the others.

Good, scriptural reasons support this notion. The first recorded sin in all of God's creation involved pride. Ezekiel 28:17 states, "Your heart was lifted up [margin, "proud"] because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor." Not only was what Lucifer thought about himself the overall cause of his downfall, it also corrupted the wisdom that should have kept him from falling. Pride blinded him to its own existence and to the impossibility of what he was trying to do! It set in motion a reaction to God that continues to today.

"A haughty look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked are sin" (Proverbs 21:4). This seems to confirm that pride gives birth to more tangible sins. As plowing prepares the earth to produce crops, so pride prepares the way to produce other sins. Some Bibles translate *plowing* as "lamp," indicating lighting or guiding the path into other sins. A *haughty look* shows a comparison is taking place and reveals the very essence of pride: a perverted comparison, a wrong judgment regarding the value or importance of one's self, skills, intelligence, etc.

Beauty, as expressed in Ezekiel 28:17, should not be confined to how Lucifer judged his outward appearance, because it is later expanded to splendor. God says of him, "You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty" (verse 12). He "had it all"—good looks, brains, skill and power! And it got to him. His very gifts, his strengths, deceived him into misjudging his value in comparison to others.

Proverbs 18:10-12 expresses a consistent biblical principle regarding pride:

The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his own esteem. Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty, and before honor is humility.

Pride springs from an unjustified sense of well-being, wealth or strength. The righteous are justified in looking to the Lord for safety, but the wealthy and proud man falls to his destruction because, in his perverted judgment, his confidence is in the wrong place.

Satan's Pride

Isaiah 2:6-18 amplifies this theme clearly. In the vanity of our pride we put our trust in material strengths. A sense of strength perverts our judgment and soon we are in conflict with God and men. Twice in this brief section God says He will bring low the haughtiness of men. Lucifer's pride hardly endeared him to God—it eventually brought him into open conflict with Him! He was cast down (brought low) to earth, but because his pride is still influencing him, the worst is yet to come. And in the interim, he is infecting us with his most dangerous attribute.

His influence over humanity is seen in Ephesians 2:2. "In which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience." Though written in the past tense, this section does not mean we are free from the influences broadcast by that wicked spirit. If we do not guard against them, we are fully capable of receiving his attributes.

God gives Satan an interesting title in Job 41:34: "He is king over all the children of pride." There is no doubt who this is describing! James 4:6 and I Peter 5:5 both quote a version of Proverbs 3:34: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." The king of pride is Satan, and his children are those who show his characteristics (John 8:44).

Consider this in the light of Proverbs 13:10: "By pride comes only contention, but with the well-advised is wisdom." Satan means "Adversary." He is against others, an opponent, the adversary of God and the very ones he is king over! The leader is the adversary of his own children! Revelation 9:11 adds two additional names: "And they had as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, but in Greek he has the name Apollyon." *Abaddon* means Destruction and *Apollyon* means Destroyer. The king of pride is a destructive and destroying adversary.

When God says, "By pride comes *only* contention," He means that this kind of pride has not a single good fruit! Not even one! Lucifer's pride brought him into contention with God, two-thirds of the angels, the demons who now submit to him and billions of deceived humans who do not resist him. Surely the demons are a squabbling bunch held together only by Satan's power and their united hatred of God and His children. This has occurred because they deceived themselves into thinking more of themselves than they ought, which perverted their judgment in other areas of life.

Human Pride

Since this spirit "now works in the sons of disobedience," it is no wonder that the history of mankind is an almost continuous stream of wars. It is competition taken to its ultimate level, where the stakes are life and death for individuals and for the nations. So many subscribe to the "survival of the fittest" theory because much supporting, material evidence exists from the history of mankind and in the animal world, where reflections of Satan's nature are easily seen.

Have you ever been driving in heavy traffic, intent on keeping yourself safe, when suddenly someone cut in front of you, making you jamb on your brakes and swerve to avoid an accident? What was your reaction? Did anger immediately arise? Did you think or even say something like, "How could you do that to **ME**?" Did you wish you were driving a tank so you could blast that person and "get even" for frightening you? Did you actually speed up, swerving out of your lane to pull alongside the offending driver, to shake your fist and curse at him or even try to edge him off the side of the road? If so, that was pride reacting in you.

Maybe none of us have gone that far, but even so, most of us have had similar thoughts. We can be thankful that we controlled our thoughts or had no power to bring them to pass. But some do not govern themselves well and end up committing a crime. Isaiah prophesied Christ's reaction to a far more threatening situation. "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). How does your reaction compare?

"Compete" is defined in *Webster's Dictionary, Deluxe Encyclopedic Edition* as "to try to get what others also seek and which all cannot have." Now we understand why the United States is full of violence! The dynamic of American capitalism is competition. We are told, "Be all that you can be!" From earliest childhood we are urged to strive, to compete **against** others, and these others rarely have any alternative but to compete in return. Guess whose spirit is driving America's way of life?

Competition makes it difficult for people to cooperate because it instills the concept of winning, of getting the prize, the honor, the acclaim, the satisfaction, *for the self*. Does pride play a part in this? You know it does! It is especially seen in athletics where pride is the driving force that propels the gifted on to victory.

People gamble largely because of pride, thinking they are smart enough and lucky enough to beat the odds. Because their judgment is perverted, they compete against the oddsmakers and other gamblers for an almost impossible prize. This same perversion of judgment by pride is often why some people who know better about God, His laws and sin, still sin. They become gamblers. They think they can beat the odds.

So says Psalm 10:2, 11: "The wicked in his pride persecutes the poor; let them be caught in the plots which they have devised. . . . He has said in his heart, 'God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see it.'" Lucifer's pride rushed him pell-mell into a confrontation with God, whose power was insurmountable. And yet, simultaneously his pride convinced him he could do it. He could beat God! The universe's first gambler had emerged.

Pride in Fellowship

When our fellowship is disturbed by contention, we have strong evidence that pride is involved. The Adversary is at work. Brethren are competing for something which not everyone can have. With God, we cannot be whatever we want, for Paul writes in I Corinthians 12:18, 24: "But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. . . . But God composed the body. . . ."

In Romans 12:3, the same apostle says, "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." This is not meant either as a put down in any way, or that one is better than another. But not everyone is the same. God gives gifts to each to fulfill his position in the body. Another may not be as well-equipped to do a particular job because He has given other gifts for him to fulfill his function. He gives these diverse gifts so we can cooperate for the well-being of the body, not compete to its destruction. If offense and division among brethren are occurring regularly, we can be certain that the king of pride is stirring up pride in them to compete for something all cannot have.

Paul expresses a common pitfall of church members regarding pride in I Corinthians 8:1-2. "We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." A cause of Corinth's divided congregation was that the members were flaunting their gifts, claiming they wanted to edify, but the fruits of division showed Paul the real motivation was intellectual vanity—pride.

A truly perverse aspect of pride is that one does not actually have to be wise, intellectual, skilled or accomplished to have it, but merely perceiving within one's heart that one is so is enough. Jesus says:

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man." (Matthew 15:18-20)

Compare this thought with Proverbs 26:16: "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly." Has the sluggard really accomplished anything that might be a basis for being considered wise? No, but he thinks he knows all the answers, and in his pride lets others know.

Consider also Romans 1:22-23, "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things." These verses show that pride motivates us to do things that make no sense in the light of God's truth. It motivates us to exalt ourselves above others, to compete against others and to reject truth to continue the exaltation and promotion of the self. We will take this to such an extent that we will gamble—even with our own and other's lives—to bring that result about.

How Pride Manifests Itself

We can see in Lucifer how pride will show itself in us.

For you have said in your heart: "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High." (Isaiah 14:13-14)

Pride brings us into contention with God. It will exalt us into breaking one or more of His commandments, perhaps as a way of life. It will exalt one to deny what a scripture clearly says to defend a privately held belief (*i.e.*, women speaking in church, hair length).

It will cause one to reject the leadership of the ministry, given to the church as a gift of God (*cf.* Jeremiah 43:1-2). It will exalt us into striving for positions of leadership in the church (study all of Numbers 16).

Pride will exalt one against brothers in the church fellowship so we do not really love them (*i.e.*, gossiping about them, accusing, cutting them down [even in jest], never fellowshiping with them). It will make us contend with our brothers over scriptures that have little or nothing to do with salvation, but "winning" an argument will become very important to us so we will not lose face.

It is no wonder Proverbs 28:25 says, "He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the LORD will be prospered." God resists the proud, but gives grace (gifts that prosper one spiritually) to the humble.

The father and king of pride is an *adversary*. Whenever we witness contention that disrupts unity, where confusion and frustration are being produced, we can be sure that his dominant attitude is infecting the group. We need to examine ourselves to see where we may need to repent.

Brethren, Romans 14:17-19 says as clearly and concisely as any place in the Bible what fellowship with God, each other and Christianity are all about.

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify [build up] another.

Pride always moves us toward things that we feel will benefit us in this life and brings us into contention with others. Humility focuses on the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and produces peace and joy.