

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Some lessons from Proverbs: A lesson in humility

"I've lost fourteen pounds in the last eight weeks."

"I haven't touched a drop of alcohol or smoked a cigarette for four months."

"I have just given my first million pounds to charity."

"I haven't had a proud thought all week."

Of all the virtues, humility must be the hardest for mankind to make progress with. This fleeting virtue that gives real quality to anyone so easily crumbles to dust as pride is endemic within our genetic makeup. You see, each of the first three statements may still be true, despite the boast about relative success. But as soon as we think that we are beginning to make progress in slaying the dragon of pride, we find that we haven't even left base camp. The boast annuls the statement and renders it worthless.

This morning we begin a series on the book of Proverbs. We will look at some of the great themes that run throughout the book, noticing how relevant they are to today, even though they were written over 2,500 years ago. Perhaps we should just note two things before we start.

Firstly, the book of Proverbs, like the Psalms, is Hebrew poetry. As such it relies upon repetition of thought to make an impact. English poetry on the other hand tends to rely upon repetition of sound and rhyme to make a similar point. So often two similar thoughts will be found in the same verse. We do not need to try and find a difference between them as this was not intended by the author.

Secondly, the book of Proverbs is a book of wisdom for earth. It gives good and wholesome advice for all of humanity. If only the words of this book had been more energetically applied by all people, the history of mankind would read very differently. However, it takes no account of the radical transforming power of Christianity. So themes such as forgiving enemies and present suffering for future reward do not feature. The Christian's hope is entirely heavenly and it is for the soon coming Saviour that we wait, living our lives in this expectation. However, we are still left in this world and so we are expected to live wisely. Therefore, the wise advice we find in the book of Proverbs is good spiritual food for us. Indeed, I remember being given the advice when I first left home to go to university to read a chapter of the book of Proverbs every day for the first month. That really was good advice, and I would now give it to anyone who is facing big changes in their life.

So to our lesson in humility. Perhaps we should start by giving a simple definition of pride and of humility. Holman in his Bible Dictionary defines pride as: "Undue confidence in and attention to one's own skills, accomplishments, state, possessions, or position." And for humility: "A personal quality in which an individual shows dependence on God and respect for other persons."

These two qualities lie at opposite ends of a sliding scale. Naturally speaking the pointer lies at the 'thinking of self' side. By consistently relying upon the power of the Holy Spirit, this must be moved until we completely lose sight of ourselves and focus wholly upon Christ. Only then can we know true humility. The concert pianist who says, "I am rubbish at playing the piano" is not being humble. In fact he or she is likely to be proud, fishing for praise. Instead there should be a recognition that he or she has a talent - God given - and refined through hours of hard work, with a desire to use that ability for God. The definitions also show why God is not able to be proud. He has no undue confidence in His own ability because it is impossible to think too highly of God's ability - it is by definition impossible. We can never over-rate God's ability for it is infinite.

I want to spend the rest of our time this morning thinking about the verses in Proverbs and see what they teach us. To my mind they seem to fall into two broad categories:

1. God hates pride; and
2. Pride makes us the poorer.

God hates pride

- *“These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren”, Proverbs 6:16-19.*
- *“The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate”, Proverbs 8:13.*
- *“The LORD will destroy the house of the proud, but He will establish the boundary of the widow”, Proverbs 15:25.*
- *“Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; though they join forces none will go unpunished”, Proverbs 16:5.*

Did you notice how striking it is that God really hates pride? It is unusual how strongly God rates pride as an evil. I really hate snakes! And yet that is a totally irrational phobia. I have never met a real live snake in the wild. A strong sheet of glass has always separated me from them and that is the way I intend to keep it! A snake has never done me any harm, unlike ants, bees and several other creatures and yet I don't hate them. It makes no sense. Perhaps God is a little like that with pride then? Oh no, that could never be! So why is it then that God detests pride so much. After all, I guess if we were to rate a list of really bad sins, things like rape, murder, child abuse would all be in there, but pride? Come on, that hardly matters does it?

I want to read from the prophecy of Isaiah 14:12-17: *“How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! 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.’ Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit. Those who see you will gaze at you, and consider you, saying: ‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world as a wilderness and destroyed its cities, who did not open the house of his prisoners?’”*

Now in the immediate context these verses are referring to the overthrow of the Babylonian rule that had subjected Israel to captivity and slavery. However, they do have a much deeper, more sinister interpretation, and refer to the fall of the Devil far back before the world began. Note the devastating words that reflect the thoughts of the devil *“I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High”* (Isaiah 14:14). With such prideful thoughts the whole sorry saga of sin began. When we talk about original sin it should be pride that we have in mind, for that was where it all began - with the Devil thinking that he could be just like God. Now let us read Genesis 3:4-5: *“Then the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”* So the Devil had fallen because of pride and now he wants to ensnare mankind so they can suffer his judgement too. He had said *“I will be like [God]”* (Isaiah 14:14) Now he says to Eve, *“You will be like God”* (Genesis 3:4) and that seed of pride blossomed into rebellion and disobedience!

God hates pride with a righteous passion because that is where it all went wrong. It was pride that would cost God the life of His well beloved Son to put things right. And God rightly understands what we so fail to see. It is pride that leads us into a path of full blown wrong doing.

“I matter more than you, so if I take your life, well, that is not so bad.”

“My reputation is more important than yours so if I lie to you, or about you, then that isn't so bad.”

“My satisfaction is worth more than your feelings so if I cheat on you that cannot be such a bad thing.”

Pride lies at the heart of most if not all sin. No wonder God hates pride so much. If we are to be serious about serving Him, we need to have similar feelings about pride, and learn truly to hate it. Last year we ran a series about lifestyle sins in some talks to young people in Liverpool. Pride was one of them. Too often we excuse it as not so bad, so prevalent amongst everybody, so ingrained in our make up that we don't deal with it in the way that we should. Instead, if nothing else this morning, let us recognise pride for what it is - the very opposite of what God is - and make a start on judging it immediately. As soon as I start thinking about myself and my wants then I need to be ruthless and stop. As nature abhors a vacuum, the best antidote to pride is filling my thought life with Jesus and how He would have me represent Him to others - thinking about the needs of others rather than my own.

Perhaps, like me, you might be starting to realise we have an Everest to climb. I am stressed at work because I have too much to do and others are not pulling their weight. In church nobody does things my way. At home, nobody appreciates what I do. Have you ever felt these kind of thoughts? Well, from today we need to start putting an end to them. As soon as they arise we need to put them to death. It is going to be a brutal conflict, one that will not be won

quickly or without pain, but one that needs to be entered into if we are ever to please God in our lives. As soon as we catch ourselves thinking about our own needs, then we need to consider Him, who *"pleased not Himself"* (see Romans 15:3). The antidote to pride is the humility spoken of in Philippians 2:1-8, where we are told to *"esteem others better than himself"* and to *"look ... for the interests of others."* Then if we are left in any doubt as to whether it is possible, we are given the living example of the Lord Himself, who *"emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant"* (Philippians 2:8)

Maybe, in our battle with pride, we should read Philippians 2:1-8 every day until they are committed to memory, and then carry them into the workplace and into my fellowship and family. But let us take up the very real challenge that we face with ourselves. We ought not to fool ourselves into thinking that our pride is of little consequence. Yes, God will always love us, but He really, really, really hates our pride. It is always a source of deep disappointment and shame to the heart of our heavenly Father when we allow pride to go unjudged.

Pride makes us the poorer

But let us turn now to the second broad theme in Proverbs concerning pride and humility. Pride lead us to think that we know best, that I am able to determine how best to be happy in life and to get the most from my time on this planet. But those feelings of pride deceive us.

- "When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom", Proverbs 11:2.
- "By pride comes nothing but strife, but with the well advised is wisdom", Proverbs 13:10.
- *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud"*, Proverbs 16:18-19.
- *"Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honour is humility"*, Proverbs 18:12.
- *"He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the LORD will be prospered"*, Proverbs 28:25.

It is perhaps just worth reminding ourselves of the fact that it was king Solomon who wrote most of the book of Proverbs. If we had time to read the whole of 1 Kings 3 we would see that God had given Solomon the great gift of wisdom - such that none before him and none after him, would ever match him for wisdom and understanding. If I had written a book of proverbs you might rightly question its value. But when the wisest human to have ever lived is the author then we do need to take note of what he says. And the consistent theme as regards pride is that it does not enhance our humanity or our enjoyment of life.

Too often I have ruefully thought to myself that if only everyone listened to me and did what I said, or thought about things the way I do, then everything would be ok. My pride deceives me into thinking that the path to happiness and well being lies in putting myself first. Wrong!

Shame, strife, a fall, destruction - these are the things that pride will bring us. Can you imagine politicians standing up and offering these things if only you would vote for them? They would be ridiculed and would soon find themselves alone. And yet we believe ourselves when our pride offers us that elusive path to happiness. God knows what is for our good and desires that for each one of us. This is the second reason that God hates pride so much. It robs us of what God desires for us and deprives us of His best. Instead the Devil deceives us into believing that pride will enrich us. So we follow our own inclinations and impoverish ourselves, little understanding that true humility will lead to all that is best for us. Did Abraham lose out financially by letting Lot choose the better looking land for himself? Did David lose out on a crown by not snatching it for himself when the opportunity arose? Did Mary forfeit her dignity when she wiped the Lord's feet with her hair? (see John 12:3) Real examples of real, flesh and blood people who overcame pride and refused to listen to its siren voice, instead choosing a path less trodden that led to true greatness. And in this lies the great paradox. Pride diminishes us and leads to ordinariness. Humility allows God to make us great.

I guess that part of the problem we have with pride is that it is so endemic that we hardly realise that we have a problem. For years now I have had a gammy right knee. Most of the time I just get on with it and only realise it is not right because it doesn't bend as much as my left knee. Just occasionally it reminds me it isn't right with sharp pain. I think pride is like this. Occasionally we realise that we are being proud, but most of the time we just are unaware of it. So what are the symptoms?

Pride tends to manifest itself in feelings such as frustration and anger. The slow driver in front of me who is unsure of where he is going makes my blood pressure rise. Pride tends to manifest itself in a diminished sense of compassion towards others. I have worked hard for what I have so why should immigrants get special treatment? Pride tends to makes me late. After all, my time is more precious than yours, so if you have to wait for me that isn't a problem. Pride tends to rob me of my ability to sympathise. After all, I cope without help so why can't you?

Dear reader, if like me, you recognise any of these symptoms - and they are by no means an exclusive list - then perhaps you have some work to do. Before God you need to make a deliberate decision to crucify your pride

whenever and however it manifests itself. After all, all that we have belongs to God and is given to us, as stewards, to use for His glory. Before the cross of Christ, there is nothing that I can say or do to compare with that one act.

In our back garden there is an ant's nest. I guess the ants are inordinately proud of its intricacy and complexity in the way that they have built it from nothing. But with one careless step, I might crush it. In our nothingness we might find inordinate pride and pleasure, and yet next to God we are less than ants in comparison. The tragedy of our fallen humanity is that we truly have nothing to be proud about. All that is great about humanity is due to our likeness to God. All that we do that is praiseworthy has been prepared for in advance by Him. We are utterly deceived by the Devil when we allow uncontrolled pride to rule our thoughts and actions.

Conclusion

As we draw to a close this morning, let us resolve to do better, not in our own prideful strength, but in the humble recognition that we are nothing apart from what He has made us. Let us allow Solomon to speak to us across the years about the wisdom that lies in the path of humility:

- *“The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom, and before honour is humility”, Proverbs 15:33.*
- *“By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches and honour and life”, Proverbs 22:4.*
- *“A man's pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honour”, Proverbs 29:23.*

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