

Sermon 140: Romans 12:3: Humility

OUTLINE

Psychology of pride
Remedy of pride

INTRODUCTION

When I say, 'Be holy!' when you seek to apply that, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Paul has just told us to be holy, to be a living sacrifice giving our whole selves to God. In the rest of this section he moves on to tell us the specifics of what that looks like. What is the first thing Paul talks about? This question is very helpful for us to see what Paul prioritizes. Paul is moving into a new section where he talks about our relationships to one another in the church. The first application of holiness for Paul is body life and serving one another with our gifts, that is what comes next in 3-13; then he talks about relating to persecution, the authorities, etc. Already we are taught several things. That holiness is not something done in a cave, it is not the journey of the lonely traveller. Also that the first place we should be thinking about being holy is in holy service to one another. It helps us define spiritual worship not in terms of existential experiences but in loving connection and selfless service.

However, before Paul talks about serving one another there is a massive obstacle that needs to be overcome first, pride. 12:3, 'For 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.' So here is the chain of Paul's thought. 'I want you to be holy; I want you to do this by serving one another; but this can only be done if you are humble.' And so we must begin our investigation of being a living sacrifice where Paul does, by starting with humility. Paul here begins his description of the Christian life the same way Jesus does in the Beatitudes, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Today as we look at humility we will do it under two headings, firstly we want to look at the psychology of pride and then its remedy.

Psychology of pride

Paul is about to exhort all to serve according to the grace given them v6 and so appropriately begins with a reminder of the grace of apostleship that he has been granted, from which he calls the church to be humble, 'For by the grace given to me....' This shows Paul giving an example of how to use gifts, but it also enforces the prescriptions he is about to lay out. His words come not as suggestion or advice but with apostolic authority, as God's spokesman.

In the first place Paul addresses himself to 'everyone among you.' In other words, every single one of us struggles with pride and needs to hear this exhortation. It is humorous to me to read up on psychological definitions of various maladies. When it comes to pride there are many 'technical' terms used. Hubris which is literally the Greek word for pride, megalomania; god-complex; but my personal favourite is 'narcissistic personality disorder.' I find it humorous because I cannot read the definitions without finding my own sins mentioned. Listen to the symptoms of those who have this 'disorder.' These come from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

'Grandiosity with expectations of superior treatment from others.' In other words you act like you are a Lord and expect others to admit your superiority.

'Fixated on fantasies of power, success, intelligence, attractiveness, etc.' In other words you are deluded about how clever, good looking, artistic, and gifted you are.

'Self-perception of being unique, superior and associated with high-status people and institutions.'

'Needing constant admiration from others.'

'Sense of entitlement to special treatment and to obedience from others.'

'Exploitative of others to achieve personal gain.'

'Unwilling to empathize with others' feelings, wishes, or needs.'

'Intensely envious of others and the belief that others are equally envious of them.'

'Pompous and arrogant demeanour.'¹

Do any of these sound familiar? The grand irony is that these things are set down in such a way that it creates the impression that there are those who have these problems and those who don't. Paul recognises that we all have some degree of narcissistic personality disorder, it is called sin. Narcissism comes from the name Narcissus in Greek mythology. He was a hunter and the son of two gods. He was beautiful and Nemesis lured him to look at his own reflection and he fell in love with it, lost the will to live and died gazing at his own reflection. As Christians we recognise that each of us is mentally ill, we are incurably bent in on ourselves, we are all sinners by nature. We don't think that there are those who are 'mad' and those who aren't, we are all to one degree or another sinful and therefore extremely selfish. We are all proud. Paul recognises that this pride, this putting of oneself before others is destructive and must be put aside in order for any holiness or any true body life to take place.

In our pride we not only exalt ourselves over others and fail to act in love to our neighbour, we have committed the worse crime of raising ourselves against God. He who made us, He who by right of who He is has the right to rule and command us, we have resisted and rebelled against. We have blinkered ourselves and fixated on our own interests refusing to acknowledge the God by whom we exist and who is worthy of all praise and obedience. When we become Christians we recognise this wrong. We feel it to be an ingrained bent that we hate and strive against. When we first saw how we had treated God, and saw how prone we are to wander we hated ourselves for our selfishness, for our wilful blindness. We came to God for mercy and He forgave us because of Christ's death on the cross. However, we are not in heaven yet, we have not received new bodies yet we still have indwelling sin with which we have to contend and we find in our Christian lives that self is always ready to exalt itself in pride, alive and well as long as there is any life in this body of death. We could not be saved unless we saw and renounced ourselves as proud rebels, that is why Jesus spoke about the poor in spirit being blessed and inheriting the kingdom. For it is only those who humble themselves whom God grants grace. But just as we cannot be saved unless we are humble, we cannot be sanctified without humility either.

Do you continue to feel your deep need to kill the proud sinner in your heart or is that instinct lost with the forgetfulness of your conversion. Here are a few ways to tell whether you need to revive your fight on this front. Do you feel that in any conversation that your opinion was the weightiest, the wittiest, the most sane and intelligent? Do you feel that your tastes in food, drink, music, art and culture are the best, that your palette casts the connoisseurial mould. Do you feel that when anyone does something that your opinion should be sought out? In any endeavour are you anxious that your contribution should be recognised? Are you liberal in your praise of others, for it is those who are self-centred that find it hard to praise others? Are you able to lose graciously without fighting or following it

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissistic_personality_disorder, accessed February 9 2017.

up with many excuses and explanations? Can you bear to hear others being praised without sullyng their good name by adding some negative criticism? Pride is the heart of sin, an imitation of the devil, and an enemy to loving service of the saints.

Remedy of pride

We have seen the universal malady of pride, now how does Paul say we must address it? 'I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.' Paul in the Greek uses the word 'think' 4 times. 3 different forms are used the first is literally hyperthink, for highmindedness; the second and third are the same and the usual word for think, and the third is literally clearthink, our translations use 'sober judgement' to translate it, this was the well-known virtue of clear reason. No doubt Paul is thinking about his statements in v2 about having a renewed mind and seeking to apply it to oneself. And here is the key for us as to how we can overcome this ingrained pride.

Firstly, we must not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. There are many ways that we can over value ourselves.

We can think that we are more moral and good than we actually are. This in fact is the problem with every human being before they are saved. We will always think that we are not as bad as to deserve eternal hell for our sins.

We can think that we are somehow better than others because of our nationality or place of abode. The Jews would have thought themselves superior to Gentiles and Samaritans; the Romans would have counted themselves superior due to their political position; the Greeks would be conceited due to their cultural prowess and heritage. Paul is writing to citizens of the great city of Rome which would have been cause for pride. We are all brought up to think our own tribe better than another.

When we are young we determine a person's value by the movies they have seen; by the music they think is good; by the expensive fashion items they have acquired; or by the friends they hang out with. We determine our own value to be better than others by these external things. Our sense of self-worth is determined by whether we meet these peer determined criteria. Bullying, marginalization, factionalism are all present, we don't seem to outgrow them just make them more refined looking.

We need to remind ourselves that what we think determines what we do. All of these actions are shaped by worldly ways of thinking. In other words they are shaped by godless ideas, ideas that try and interpret reality as if God and His truth are not real. For example, we will feel better about ourselves and see ourselves as better than others if we are driving a car with a more powerful engine. If we do our value does not lie in the fact we are made in the image of God and by God's adopting us as royalty in Christ but by performance on the sports field or race track. Our pursuit of wealth, fashion items, muscles, thin waist lines, or any of things that we pursue in order to feel good about ourselves are you pursuing them out of the truth or are you believing lies? Can you see where this is leading? If you believe lies about your own self-worth, that will lead you to treat others by the same criteria. If you believe that men are intrinsically better than women you will be chauvinistic and will not be able to serve women in the church or respect them enough to give them opportunity to serve. If you believe that white people are naturally more superior to black people then you will not serve them or allow them into leadership positions. If you determine value by wealth and position then you will despise the poor and not loving and sacrificially serve them. Can you see how wrong thinking about your own superiority is destructive in the church?

The sinful mind is a paradox, for on the one hand we overestimate our value and exalt ourselves in pride. But on the other we have a contradictory underestimate of human life as well. We abort, we euthanize, we hate ourselves and commit suicide, we self harm. But this overestimation and underestimation of humanity are both consistent with a denial of God's truth and being driven by a self-centredness which is the heart of sin.

Paul calls us next then to think with sober judgement. This literally means sound judgement and was a virtue understood to be the opposite of pride. The Greek philosophers had good advice and they had a saying, 'know thyself.' This is an excellent saying and most helpful when seeking to come to grips with your individuality and abilities. However, the Greeks by reason alone can only get so far, so Paul adds, 'each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.' To inject into your world view a sovereign God who is your creator who made you as you are and has given you particular gifts, this is the foundation for true self-knowledge and humility. If a correct definition of pride is, 'a wrong estimation of yourself' whether for the worse or the better; then a good definition of humility is 'a correct estimation of yourself'. And this we cannot do unless we see ourselves in light of God. In other words, Paul is setting up a different epistemological basis for knowledge; it does not begin with a true knowledge of self but a true knowledge of God and yourself before Him. Most wrong philosophies have begun with this error. Most philosophies accept only man and his abilities to test and think as the ground for their discovery of the truth of things. But we cannot know all things truly unless we know them in light of God. Reason agrees that there is a Creator and Revelation states it. Paul is here employing this correct way of thinking. That we think about ourselves but that we factor God into all our thinking that we can think correctly.

What a difference this makes to all our thinking. There we were thinking that we were better than everyone else, or just a few people, but when we think of ourselves in light of the truth of God we come to see that we too are terrible sinners deserving judgement and in need of a Saviour. There we were comparing ourselves with each other and by the tiny differences between us creating new species of humanity, but in light of God we see that we all fall short of the glory of God. In light of God's glory I see my sins as large as they are and instead of seeing myself as better than others, knowing my inner life, knowing the brazen way I have chosen to rebel against God I begin to feel myself as the worst of all sinners not the best of men. Now when I look at my brother or sister in Christ I cannot look at them and think that I am morally superior, I too had sentenced myself to judgement. I cannot look at their sins as worse than mine.

But what about my abilities and gifts? I cannot look at my abilities and think that I must be more worthy of them. Here we are reminded of an important truth, everything we have we have by grace not by virtue or merit. This is how John the Baptist put it in John 3:27, 'John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.' Your good looks; your fantastic head of hair; your singing voice; your dexterity for musical instruments; your mind for knowledge and arguments; your memory; your compassionate nature; your well-paying job. Every single one of these is given to you from above by grace. God does not owe you life; your life is forfeit in Adam. You have not been so good that deserve the life you have and the many abilities you have. If you have something that someone else does not can you think to yourself, I deserve it?

Humility about your gifts means recognising that you are not the source of them or have performed to merit them, but it also means accepting the gifts you have been given and not lying about them. Paul talks about each person having been assigned a measure of faith. This is a difficult statement to understand. There are two main ways to understand it.

Firstly, that faith is the thing measured out and is being used in a unique way to indicate a portion of grace for service. Secondly, faith is not the thing measured out but the measuring stick to which all our serving must conform. Commentators are torn but I favour the interpretation that says that faith is a portion of grace to equip you for service. The point Paul is making is that every single Christian must be humble and realise firstly, that each one has gifts from God and secondly, that they differ.

Let us explore these. Every person has a gift. There is a false humility that says, 'I am useless I have no gifts.' This is either a statement of immaturity because this is something that a young person who has not yet seen their latent abilities yet would say; or it is a statement of pride in disguise.

Let me say to the young person, 'Be patient! Be faithful!' If you are faithful and get on with serving the Lord in the many ways you can, you will soon begin to see where your gifting lies in the areas of enjoyment and the areas of blessing. Some abilities are honed over years and are only recognised in their mature state. For example, I was useless at everything as a young person, I had no distinct talents. I was average at most things and even below average. This meant I had to work hard at things, I was often frustrated and wanted to give up. But if I persevered I often found that I was able to analyse a thing and even teach it afterwards. I was able to analyse the skills of those who could do it naturally and break it down and teach it. My struggles of not being able to do anything well were a blessing when mixed with an ability to analyse so that I could then even teach a thing. Be faithful be patient, you do have gifts, they take time to surface when you are young.

To the person who says you are useless as disguised pride, what do I mean by disguised pride? Well, what would you do if I agreed with you that you are useless? You would take offence wouldn't you? This is because you wanted me to say, 'O, no you are amazing.' To claim that God has not given you any gifts is a denial of the clear teaching of scripture.

1 Cor. 12:7, 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' God has sovereignly assigned you your gifts. When we begin to think about gifts we all long for the sensational ones. We all want to perform miracles, be evangelists to the masses, or be the next great theologian. But we need to be honest with the gifting that God has given to us. The whole body cannot be an eye or a mouth, we need the variety and the diversity of gifts, and acknowledging God's sovereignty we can have contentment when we realise we are not the next great evangelist. This will also help us not to scorn or look down on the gifting that God has determined for anyone else. How dare any of us despise God's gifting to others. We would only do this if we were trained by a worldly way of thinking and not by the truths we have been stating. This also prepares us to see our gifts as necessary and the gifts of others serving us as God's serving us through them.

There is much more that we will be saying about the gifts. But let me ask you now; are you humble in your view of your abilities and how you view the gifts of others. Do you see yourself as God does? A sinner employed by grace to serve. One who has no grounds to scorn others? One who is not to bring the world's way of evaluating things into the church? Are you seeing yourself correctly and therefore also able to see the body correctly? I can think of no better way to end this sermon than to quote to you Philippians 2:3-9. Here Paul is urging the Philippians who were tempted to disunity to be humble like Christ. 'Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found

in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'