

Do not be proud

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 6th May 2007

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you (Romans 12:3).

Introduction

Last week we were learning how the apostle Paul urged his readers, and how the Holy Spirit urges us today through what Paul wrote, to be totally changed in the way we think and live. We are not to conform to the pattern of this age, of this world in which we live. We must not go along with the crowd. Rather, we are to be transformed. The new desires that we have through having been born again must work their way out in the way we live our lives. This will happen as our minds are renewed in the way we think, as we receive God's Word and as it is applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Then we will "prove" God's will in our lives. We will experience just how good and pleasing and perfect it is to obey God's will.

The apostle then goes on to apply this principle to the lives of his readers. The first thing he does is to speak to his readers about the way in which they think about themselves. He urges them not to think about themselves more highly than they ought, but rather to think with sober judgement, according to the measure of faith they have been given. In other words, Paul is challenging the sin of pride in his readers.

We should not be surprised by the fact that Paul deals with the sin of pride first of all as he is applying principles he has outlined in the first two verses of Romans chapter 12. Pride lies at the root of all sin. It is pride which led to the condemnation of the devil. It is pride which led Adam into sin, as he fell into the

temptation to be like God, “knowing good and evil.” It is pride that lies at the root of men’s continuing unbelief and rebellion against God. It is pride which leads men to refuse to believe the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is pride which destroys relationships, leading to quarrels, and moving those who have quarrelled to refuse to be reconciled to each other.

This verse breaks down naturally into the following headings:

1. Paul’s authority and humility
2. How we should *not* think of ourselves
3. How we *should* think of ourselves

Let us consider these points together.

1. Paul’s authority and humility

Paul says at the beginning of this verse, “By the grace given me I say to each one of you...”

See how Paul both reasserts his authority and at the same time expresses deep humility.

He reasserts his authority as an apostle by saying “I say to each one of you”. He first stated this authority at the beginning of the letter, where he introduced himself as “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God (Romans 1.1). Now he reminds them of the authority that he has as an apostle. Because he is Christ’s appointed apostle, who speaks the very Word of God to God’s people, he can “lay down the law” to other believers. He can say “I say to you” with the same authority that Christ said “But I tell you...” (Matthew 5.22 and 28). And he imposes this authority upon all other believers, without exception. “I say to each one of you.” All believers, from the most important to the least important must heed what the apostle says.

Yet he combines this reassertion of his authority with astonishing humility. He speaks “by the grace given me.” What is grace? It is God’s totally undeserved love. Paul never forgot what a sinner he had been, and how he was saved from eternal condemnation only through God’s completely undeserved love. This is how he puts it in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verses 13 – 16:

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

Paul attributed his salvation entirely and completely to the undeserved love of God to him. And not only did he attribute his salvation to the grace of God, he also attributed his ministry as an apostle to God's undeserved love. As he says in Ephesians chapter 3 verses 7 and 8, "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ"

Paul did not "lord it over" other believers. He did not see himself as being superior or worthy of "reverence". He was a brother with the other believers. His authority was not due to any merit or virtue of his own, but purely due to the undeserved grace God had given him to be an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we see that Paul was not guilty of "do what I say but do not do what I do". The humility that he called his readers to exercise he embodied in his own life.

2. How we should *not* think of ourselves

Secondly, we see from this verse how we should *not* think of ourselves. Paul says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." We sometimes use the word "hyper" when we want to describe someone who "over the top" in the way he is speaking. Our word "hyper" is the English version of the Greek word that Paul uses here. He is saying we should not think "hyper" thoughts of ourselves. This is what pride is, having an over-inflated view of our own worth and importance. Being big-headed, or puffed up, like a balloon.

What is wrong with pride? Pride is self-worship. It is turning yourself into an idol and worshipping yourself. It is making yourself the centre of the universe. Our

world sees nothing wrong with it. It actually encourages pride. "Believe in yourself" the experts tell us. "Stand up for your rights." "Don't let yourself be treated like a doormat." "Have more self-esteem." But in God's estimation human pride is an abomination, because it steals from God the honour which is due to him alone. The first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20.3). When we are proud we put the god of self above the worship of Almighty God.

Therefore God is implacably opposed to pride. "He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3.34), which is quoted twice in the New Testament in the form "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (James 4.6 and 1 Peter 5.5).

Therefore it is a law built into the very fabric of the universe that pride leads to destruction. Our own English saying says "Pride goes before a fall". This saying is based upon what the Bible says in the book Proverbs chapter 16 verse 18, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." Jesus warned repeatedly that "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Matthew 23.12, Luke 14:11, Luke 18:14).

In the Bible there are numerous cases of individuals and whole societies which were brought to ruin through pride. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because they were "were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me [God]" (Ezekiel 16.49 – 50). Nebuchadnezzar was judged with a period of insanity because of his pride. He boasted "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?", and immediately his sanity was taken away from him until he acknowledged that God was supreme over all the earth (Daniel 4.30 – 32). Haman was filled with hatred for the Jews because Mordecai, a Jew, would not bow down to him and his pride was offended. So he plotted to have all the Jews killed, and built a huge set of gallows upon which to hang Mordecai, but landed up being himself hung on these gallows. So we could go on. Nation after nation, individual after individual, judged by God because of pride.

God hates pride so much that the entire method of salvation was devised so that there could be no trace of boasting on the part of any human being for gaining a place in heaven, even though this meant providing salvation at the immense cost of the life of his only begotten Son. God saves people by grace

alone, by faith in Christ alone, so that “no one may boast before him.” (1 Corinthians 1.29)

Pride is a very subtle and devious sin, which creeps up on us without our being aware of it. So how can we detect pride in us? Here are some tell tale signs of pride:

- Lack of respect for the Word of God. The person who thinks he knows better than God, who thinks he can dismiss the teaching of the Bible as being “outdated” or “irrelevant” is a proud and arrogant person, who is pitting his own judgement against that of Almighty God.

- Mocking. Mockers are proud people who in their pride think that they can look down on God and laugh at him and his Word, and look down on their fellow men and pour scorn upon them.

- Boasting about one’s own achievements. If you are a proud person then your tongue will betray you. You will not be able to keep quiet about what you consider to be your abilities and your achievements.

- Conspicuous self-denigration. Strangely, talking yourself down can also be another form of pride. We say, “Oh, I am no good at all. I have no gifts. I cannot achieve anything.” It can be pride which leads us to speak like this, because we are desperately hoping that someone will say to us, “Oh no that’s not true. You really are a great person.”

- Belittling the achievements of others. If you are proud it will also lead you to belittle what others are doing, and to find fault with them. You try to make yourself feel good by putting others down and pointing out their failings. You may even exaggerate or invent failure on the part of others, so that you can have the solace of feeling better about yourself.

- Being judgemental and critical of others. If you are proud, you will be smugly self-confident of your own goodness, and will look down on others in what you consider to be their moral inferiority compared with you. Remember the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee in his pride prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” (Luke 18.11 – 12)

- Trying to take positions of power and honour. Do you remember the disciples vying with each other to have the pre-eminent positions in Jesus' kingdom. What was at the root of this? Pride. The desire to be number one. We see this all the time in the world, and sadly all too often in the church as well.

- Treating others as unimportant. A proud person will be rude, unpleasant, aggressive, bullying, domineering and inconsiderate. Why? Because a proud person sees others as of little significance. He does not love. He considers himself more important than others.

- Stubbornness. A proud person will not give way, even when he is shown from Scripture and from reason that his position is untenable. Why? Because he does not want to "lose face" before others.

- Refusing to listen to advice. A proud person resents being offered advice and gets angry when such advice is given, and carries on in his own way, often to his own ruin.

- Over-sensitivity to criticism. A proud person takes offence easily if he is insulted or criticised? Why? Because he loves his own honour with a passionate jealousy. Anyone who hurts his honour has, to him, committed the gravest possible sin, and is to be treated as an enemy.

- Refusal to apologise. A proud person will never apologise, even when it is pointed out to him from the Scripture that he has sinned. Instead, he counter-attacks with an accusation against the person who was kind enough to point his faults.

- Refusal to receive an apology from others. A proud person will not be reconciled to another who has hurt him, even if the person who has done wrong makes an apology.

- Self-pity. What lies at the root of self-pity? Pride. Self-pity says, "I am more important than this. I deserve a better deal. I should be recognised for what I am." Self-pity is a form of offended pride.

Do you have pride lurking in your mind? God is saying through his apostle, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought."

3. How we should think of ourselves

We come now to the third part of this verse, where Paul says how we are to think of ourselves instead. He says to his readers that they should not think of themselves more highly than they ought, "but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

We are to have a sober judgement of ourselves. Rather than being like the drunkard who is full of crazy and unrealistic views of his own abilities and importance, we should be sober, down to earth, and realistic in our view of ourselves.

What does this involve? It involves remembering, first of all, how helpless and hopeless we are in and of ourselves. Think of how you are just in terms of your physical life and health. You are utterly dependent on others. Your very existence you owe to your parents. You are utterly dependent every day on others to provide you with water, electricity, heat, food, shelter, clothing. Just imagine what would happen if all the companies were to go out of business and all the shops were to shut. How long would you survive? Ultimately, of course, we owe our existence to God. Every breath that we take is only possible because of his grace. Should he withdraw his sustaining power we would immediately cease to exist.

Then think of how you are in and of yourself spiritually and morally. What is there in your life that you can point to that would give you any right to have a relationship with God? Are there any acts in your life that you can point to that you can say have been truly, one hundred percent, good deeds? If you were to get what you deserve from God, what would you get? The answer the Bible gives is this: Hell. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3.23).

Then, if you have been saved by Christ, think, why were you saved? Was it because of your good deeds or merit in any way? Not at all! "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast." (Ephesians 2.8 – 9).

Then, if you have any spiritual gifts, or if you are used by God to be a blessing to others in any way, or if you have made any progress towards becoming like Christ, why is this? Is it because you are somehow intrinsically virtuous? Not at

all! It is only because God has given you what you do not deserve. "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?" (1 Corinthians 4.7)

This is the point that Paul is making when he says that we are to think "in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." He is going to go on to speak about spiritual gifts in the church. We are to be realistic about whatever gifts we may have. We should neither denigrate the gifts we have, nor over-inflate them. But above all, we should realise that whatever gifts we have are "in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." The word for "given" is the word which is used to describe when an inheritance is divided among heirs. God has divided his gifts among his people. We should understand what our "inheritance" of gifting is, but we should also realise that whatever our gifting it is only by God's grace, not according to any merit or worth of our own.

Conclusion

What is God telling us through these verses? We need to guard very carefully against the deadly sin of pride. It is absolutely ruinous to our relationship with him, and to our relationships with each other.

Let me ask you this question? Have you ever trusted in Christ as your Saviour? Could it be that your pride has stopped you from accepting God's testimony about yourself as a sinner who is totally incapable of saving himself or herself? Could it be that your pride stops you from stooping to receive from God's hand the free gift of eternal life that is in Christ? Are you going to refuse God's salvation simply because you are too proud to accept it? Don't be so foolish! Repent of your silly petty-minded pride. Humble yourself. Admit what you know is true anyway, that you are a terrible sinner. Look to Christ to save you from everlasting punishment.

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