

## On Pride

If one spends a little time reading the works of Augustine one might just discover a bit of a disjuncture from the world in which we live. Augustine does not like pride and he regularly found Scriptural support for that position. The Bible also has a rather dim view of human pride. The stiff-necked Israelites the Exodus stories and the haughty “cows of Bashan” who lounged on their ivory couches all met with God’s displeasure. Through his preaching and writing, Augustine’s appropriation of pride as a terrible vice left an enormous stamp on the whole medieval period, so much so that the great moralists of that age ranked pride as the worst of all sins.

How different it is for us today. The preacher who brings up the term pride has a little work to do. The language has radically changed for us. The way we use the term “pride” simply does not any longer fit into the usage of the text so well. Is there a proper or even virtuous pride? Most folks today see pride as a virtue, not a vice. My football coach used to call us to have a little pride when we were getting beaten badly in a game. He meant a good thing. What is good pride? We might be proud of our city or even of our congregation. In fact, I think a great deal of evangelism torpor comes because people are not proud of their congregation, they are ashamed of it and that is not a good thing.

The same issue comes up with the term “boast.” Paul speaks of boasting in Christ – and encourages it. Yet, my mother was death on boasting. The language we use sometimes does not fit exactly with the Biblical language.

The preacher who is ascending to a pulpit will need to take this into account. What is the difference between good pride and sinful pride? Is it not that God is at the center of good pride? I can be proud of what Jesus has done for me. The psalmist regularly speaks of declaring the works of God who has rescued the psalmist. That is not really pride, but that is honesty.

The antithesis of pride is humility? Is humility automatically the virtue which corresponds to pride? It can be, but the humility which opposes pride is not the “I am a worm” sort of humility, but the honest self-appraisal which notices that God has in fact done a good thing in me, and perhaps despite me! Too often I think we have pridefully insisted that our sins are so great that we must never speak of anything else. But the result is our “humble” penitence ends up displacing the greater work of Christ in forgiving us. That is a spiritual pride.

A true humility, the antithesis of pride, is to admit our need and to admit/proclaim that God has met that need. I am forgiven. That could actually be labeled a virtuous pride. Not only that, but this sort of humility is engaged in service. The fruit of healthy pride or healthy humility is action, especially service. The distinction which might work best between healthy and sinful pride is to consider the fruit of that pride.

How does pride show up in our lives and the lives of the people whom we serve?

1. I think of a woman who aborted her downs syndrome child because her conditioned ruined her dreams of the sort of motherhood she envisioned for herself. Pride can lead us to terrible places.
2. I think of marriages that are sickened because one thinks too much of self and not of giving to the other and acts upon those thoughts.
3. I think of folks who cannot receive help/gifts from another – it must always be paid for. I recollect a neighbor woman to whom my wife once casually gave some cut flowers from our yard as she was in the adjacent back yard. She rushed into her house and brought a loaf of bread. My wife just want to share some flowers. This often is shifted vertically as well. Even God cannot give me forgiveness, I have to earn it. This is a particularly dangerous sort of pride. The man who asked Jesus “who is my neighbor” seemed to have this sort of pride. He thought he could earn it.
4. But even the widow whose congregation wants to help her in the event of her husband’s death is not actually being humble when she refuses it. She is being proud in a strange sort of way.
5. Our churches often have a sense of pride which gets in the way of ministry. Do we recoil at the thought of helping some of those people?
6. Denominations can be proud – isolating themselves from others lest they be sullied by their impure doctrine/practices. It is good to be concerned/proud of solid doctrine, but when you believe that you have it and no one else does, that is problematic pride.
7. The foolish rich man of the parable in Luke which we read a few weeks ago was foolishly proud. He put himself in the center of that picture.
8. The person who believes that his/her sins are too great for God to forgive suffers from a sort of prideful arrogance. To believe that my sins are so significant that God’s death upon a cross cannot expunge them is simply pride. (C. F. W. Walther used this line of thought in pastoral ministry when counseling those who despaired over their sins.)
9. We can even be proud of our humility, oddly enough. Some are very concerned about pride and seek to be humble, but then really hope that God or someone else is noticing that they have been humble. Pride sneaks into our hearts so easily.
10. Pride does not listen to God’s gracious and loving words. Pride would tell God what is up, what he needs to do, and what I want. Pride wants to chart the course. It cannot follow God obediently and humbly.
11. Pride has a problem with forgiveness – pride often doesn’t see the need. It can easily see the need that others have for God’s redemption, but it is hard to see my own need.

12. Pride often intersects with coveting from the week before. It loves to compare. Armenio says that this is how it is used in Hispanic culture. Pride is often expressed when one sees someone who is inferior or lesser.
13. The opposite of pride might not be humility but service. Jesus evidenced the opposite of wicked pride by serving people, ultimately by serving all humanity through his cross, death, and resurrection. Thus serving becomes a blessing from the Lord which gives us joy. The willingness to help the other is the opposite of pride. This could apply to the folks who are serving in the congregation, but also to those who serve family members, etc.

Pride will frequently isolate us, cutting us off from the community into which God has created us and redeemed us.