

A Parable on Pride

Luke 14:1-11 | March 1, 2020 | Bryce Beale

The British thinker and theologian, C.S. Lewis, once wrote,

According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.¹

He is right. Pride is, so far as we can tell, the essential vice that sits at the root of all others. If there were no pride, there would be no hell.

What was it that expelled our first parents from the Eden of paradise and brought the divine curse upon our whole race? It was not the eating of a piece of fruit—not by itself. The error that ruined our world was the pride that took the fruit.

Pride was the bait the devil dangled before Eve's eyes. Certainly the fruit was appealing for its taste and its beauty, but this was the lure that hooked us: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."²

Already Adam and Eve were like God, for they alone in all creation were crafted in his image. Already they knew good and evil, for God told them what was good and what was evil. How then did the devil's bargain hold any weight? What was he offering them that they did not already have at the hand of their Maker?

Only this: he was offering them autonomy. They could be, he claimed, not like God as his representatives on earth, but like God as his competition in heaven. They could know good and evil not by the words of the Lord, but by their own reasoning. They could sever the cord which bound them to Jehovah and embark upon the journey of life untethered. They could have, the serpent

¹ *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), Kindle, 121-22.

² Gen. 3:5 (ESV).

hissed, all that God had offered them and more, but without the inconvenience of God.

And Eve took the bait. When she did, it was not the mere chomping of her teeth that cast us all into oblivion—it was the severing of the cord. It was mankind’s pursuit of unqualified freedom and self-determination. It was pride.

And from this root, all other weeds of sin have since sprouted.

What we see in our continued study of the life of Jesus, in the gospel of Luke, is the fulfillment of what we find in 1 John 3: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” Pride is the devil’s work, and Jesus appeared upon our earth to chop that idolatrous Asherah down.

So with his axe he enters a house of proud Pharisees.

LUKE 14:1-11

The first event in our text quite closely resembles an event we saw not long ago, in the previous chapter. Jesus was in a synagogue on the Sabbath day and a woman was there who had been long oppressed by the devil, so that she was bent over. Jesus delivered her, but the ruler of that synagogue objected since it was on a Sabbath. Jesus then called him and his fellows out for their hypocrisy. “You hypocrites!” he said. “Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it?”³ We find a similar event, and similar words, in our text today.

But the passage is far from repetitive or unnecessary. There is always more to see in what Jesus says and does, so we must look and look again until we see it all. As we look today, we will see especially in this event evidences of pride. These are always present when the Pharisees are, but in this case they deserve special attention.

After we have observed the several evidences of their pride, and of our own, we will then be ready for Jesus’ parable about pride that begins in verse 7. We are granted to see pride played out in the first part of our passage, so that we are better ready to receive Jesus’ teaching about pride in the second part.

³ Luke 13:15.

To these two parts we now direct our attention, with the prayer that God would by them kill the pride within each one of us.

Evidences of pride

Critical

First then we must make note of the several ways pride shows itself in the Pharisees, in the first half of our text. These are expressions of pride common to all men and women, and we will all see at least some of ourselves in them, if we are willing to be honest.

The first evidence of pride appears in the very first verse: “One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.” Jesus has entered a remarkably religious house, owned by not only a Pharisee, but a ruler of the Pharisees. He and the others will recline on pillows on the ground and eat at low tables, as was the custom in that day, with food no doubt prepared the day before so that the Sabbath would not be violated.

But thoroughly religious places can easily become the swamps most dense with pride in this world, buzzing with peevishness and foul by long practice in hypocrisy. Sadly, this house was such a swamp. Its surface had a thin coat of religion, but underneath was pride.

For although these are Sabbath-observant Pharisees, the text says “they were watching [Jesus] carefully.”

Watching him why? Not to learn from him, but to catch him in something he might say or do. We learned this about the Pharisees back in chapter 6, when Jesus performed another healing on the Sabbath day. There we read, “And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, *so that they might find a reason to accuse him.*”⁴

This is what pride does—it is the first mark of pride in our text. Pride is critical.

No relationship can survive the suffocatingly critical spirit that pride produces in a person. If any of our acquaintances were to set themselves the constant task of noting all our faults, who could stand? Humility can see a fault and say, “Well, that is not

⁴ Luke 6:7; emphasis mine.

good, and I do pray God will use me or others to help you grow out of it. But I know that I too harbor many faults, and I know that if God were to fix his gaze on all of them right now and give me no rest until all were expunged, I could never rest. I would lose heart. So, in imitation of God, I will bear long with you and grant you time and space to grow.” That is humility, and it makes for the most beautiful friendships among God’s people.

But pride, like what we find in our text, criticizes its friends to death—and often without saying anything! Notice that the Pharisees say nothing in our passage. Jesus speaks in verse 3, and then afterward we find, verse 4, that “they remained silent.” Jesus speaks again in verse 5, and again verse 6 tell us that “they could not reply to these things.” The problem is not with what they say, but with what they are. They are proud, and therefore they sit silently and watch Jesus with an all-too-critical eye, wishing to catch him in some fault so that they might exalt themselves over him.

A critical spirit is the first mark of pride in this passage.

Compassionless

A second quickly follows. See again what Jesus says and does in this first part of our passage, for it exposes another mark of pride in his opponents.

And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, “Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?”⁵

Since we have already considered the very similar scene in the previous chapter, I can quickly move to the second mark in this passage without a long explanation. For we saw before that those who opposed Jesus’ Sabbath-day healings did so from a selfish motive—they were not genuinely concerned about the law of God, nor about the sufferers involved, but they cared only that their reputations as religious be preserved.

⁵ Vv. 2-5.

In this Pharisee's house a man with dropsy, what we today call edema, is present. He suffers from an excess of fluids that make him swell up. And Jesus heals him. Then he challenges his critical crowd: Why would you help your son or ox out of a pit on the Sabbath, but not this man? As we noted last chapter, the answer must be, "Because the son and ox are mine, and this man is not. He does not benefit me in the way they do." Therefore, he doesn't genuinely care about the suffering man.

That is a second evidence of pride: compassionlessness. Proud people don't honestly care when others suffer. Jesus cares—he cares enough about the Pharisees to dine with them, and enough about the sick to touch them. Though he is receiving nothing but hostility from the Pharisees, he is willing to sit with them and teach them, in the hope that they might get some benefit. All this because Jesus genuinely cares, something the proud cannot do.

Unrepentant

A third mark follows in verse 6: "And they could not reply to these things." I draw this mark not directly from what verse 6 says, but rather from what it does not say. The Pharisees are silenced by Jesus, but it does not say they repented.

For repentance is the hardest thing for pride to swallow. It is all God requires of us before he bestows upon our heads an eternal salvation. He asks no great feats, just that we should humble ourselves under his mighty hand. The most arrogant and hardened sinner in the world, if he will but bend his knee before Christ, will be saved forever from the wrath of God. He will be immediately transferred into the domain of light and all his past offenses will be forgotten, purged by the purifying blood of Christ.

But pride will not repent easily. If you wish to know whether you are proud or not, you need only ask yourself when the last time was that you admitted your sin to another. Pride will even in these cases try to dress the sin up as less than it is, wishing to confess the wrong without having to truly repent of it. We are all good at this evasive tactic, I am sad to say.

And yet this very thing, unrepentance, is a mark of pride.

Self-promoting

Which brings us to the final evidence of pride in our passage, found in verse 7: "Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor..."

Pride is critical, compassionless, and unrepentant—and it is also self-promoting. It seems that in Jesus' day, the places just to the right and left of the host were the most esteemed, and were reserved for the most esteemed persons. Then from there the seats lessened in importance.

So as these Pharisees, as I presume most present were, arrived at the house, they began quickly vying for position. Each one wishes to be at least one seat further up than he deserves; these are the politics of ancient Palestine, with each religious individual attempting to present himself in the very best light. The concern is not that others see these men clearly as they are—truth is very low on the list of priorities—but that others see them as they wish to be seen, as more than they actually are. That is an evidence of pride.

Dining with Pharisees

If at this point you see yourself in all these marks and fear that Jesus will want nothing to do with you, then take heart from this one fact: Jesus is dining with the Pharisees. They are the embodiment of pride, yet Jesus, our text says, went to one of their houses in order to eat a meal with them.

Maybe your house is little different from the one Jesus inhabits in this text. Perhaps you are the ruler of the Pharisees, the critical and compassionless, the unrepentant and self-promoting. And you may feel that these are so characteristic of you, that life without them is unimaginable.

But Jesus went to the house of Pharisees no better than you because he wished to eat with them, to talk with them, to teach them, to save them. He came into that house axe in hand, to cut down the Asherah of idolatry and establish true worship. A Pharisee's heart may be like granite, but in Christ's hand it melts. His hand is extended to you this morning, and he appeals to you that you place your heart, no matter how hard it may be, in that hand. If you do, you will see the devil's work of pride collapse, and you will enter into peaceful pastures of humility.

Parable on pride

So, critical, compassionless, unrepentant, self-promoting—these are the evidences of pride we find in our text. We move now from these evidences in the first part of our passage, to Jesus' parable about pride in the second. On the surface, his advice may sound

as though it supports, rather than destroys, pride. He uses the thought of honor among men to motivate humility.

But his words will make more sense if we remember that he speaks them as a “parable,” according to verse 7. He will use the human situation set before him, but he is using it to make a bigger point about our relationship with God. There is a principle underneath all that Jesus is saying here, and thankfully he concludes the parable by simply stating what that principle is.

So start with the human situation, and then we will move to the principle to see how Jesus swings his axe against our pride.

Jesus says, starting in verse 8,

When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.

You can see that honor among men is a motivation Jesus offers for his advice—if you do as he says, then “you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.” On the other hand, if you refuse his advice you risk public embarrassment: “you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.”

So if we were to take this teaching by itself, we might be surprised. It works alright as a proverb, a general observation about how to live a prudent life—in fact, the Proverbs of Solomon already contain these principles. Proverbs 11:2 says, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace,” and Proverbs 15:33 completes the thought: “humility comes before honor.” But this advice as Jesus is using it here appears much more worldly and pragmatic than his usual fare. Surely Jesus is not interested in simply helping the Pharisees better promote themselves and stroke their own egos without embarrassment!

And our suspicions prove valid, for notice that after Jesus gives his parable about pride, he concludes with a principle much larger than the human situation he has described: “For everyone who

exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

This one line is the heart of our whole passage today, and if you remember nothing else, may you remember it. Put more actively, it would read, “If you lift yourself up, God will tear you down; but if you keep yourself down, God will lift you up.”

This may seem simple, but it contains depths that no man or woman has ever fully reached. This is a principle about how God chooses to operate—and if you embrace this principle, you are walking back into the Garden of Eden, into the very paradise of God. There, in the cool of the day, Adam kept himself ever low under the hand of his Maker. He was happy to do so. He did not yet possess a pride that wanted to compete with God and usurp his authority.

Adam and Eve were happy to stay beneath God’s hand, because they knew that from that hand they received every good gift. That was the hand that fashioned their habitable world, that designed the cool, refreshing climates they enjoyed. That hand crafted the many varieties of delicious food for their consumption, and fashioned the very bodies of the couple for each other.

When you believe that the hand of God is a good hand, one that is eager to lift you up and bless you, then you are happy to hide under its shadow. Then you obey the great command of 1 Peter 5:6-7, to “[h]umble yourselves...under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” This is the essence of humility—not a groveling in the dirt, but a simple confidence in the bigness, the worth, and the goodness of God.

Yes, humility sees itself as nothing and less than nothing, as mere dirt compiled and animated by God. But the eyes of humility are not long on itself—they are fixed on the hand of God. Humility is quite like any other in its desire for security, for honor, for blessing. But it seeks all these things, not apart from God, but in God, and is willing to wait for him in his good timing to grant these things.

Humility is, in other words, the rejoining of that ancient bond which Adam broke. It appears when we cease striving for the highest seat by our own power, and content ourselves with the very last one, confident that God in his good timing will honor us

as he sees fit. This is dependence—this is true humility. And everyone who humbles himself in this way will be exalted by God.

But I must end this message with a note of warning, for that is the note that sounds most loudly in the text itself. The principle that Jesus states is as good as a promise to those who live by it, but as good as a threat to those who refuse it. For he says, “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.”

You here who doubt the words of God because the serpent is tickling your ear with promises of freedom—intellectual freedom, moral freedom—your freedom is slavery. You may have heard that just recently two of the most popular YouTube stars, long known as Christians, posted for their viewers a series of spiritual deconstruction videos, their stories of how they left Christianity.

From their perspective, their own independent exercise of reason has triumphed over the shackles of belief. Now the world can love them, for they are of the world; now, their successes and subscribers are many.

But Jesus cuts through the façade of false freedom with his warning that “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.” Every lofty thought raised up against the knowledge of God will be torn down; every high mountain, flattened; every proud tree felled. And as Isaiah says, the LORD alone will be exalted in that day of judgment.

Pride cannot survive that day. None can endure that day independently, without being firmly fixed to Christ. He is the only ship which can weather the storm and reach the harbor.

And if you will simply stoop down low enough to enter that ship, you will be granted access, and you will prove the other side of Jesus’ principle, that “he who humbles himself will be exalted.”⁶

⁶ The commentator Darrell Bock quotes the poet George Herbert when commenting on this verse: “Humble we must be, if to heaven we go; / High is the roof there, but the gate is low.” *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1265.