

The Greatest Virtue

Proverbs 18:12 | August 6, 2017 | Bryce Beale

It is our privilege this morning to submit our souls to the single self-sufficient being of the universe.

The unified testimony of Scripture is that God gives to us life, and breath, and all things, but himself cannot be served by human hands, as though he needed anything.

I am indebted to this needlessness of God—it is an element of his glorious nature that I cannot extol with fervor enough, or in terms appropriate to its majesty.

To be, and never need; to have and never lack. This is God's portion, and it is this in him that we prize.

Think of the sun that beautifies the day. Do we feed it? Does it require of us any kind of fuel? No. And yet it burns on and on, sending its rays over the earth to warm us and to make our food grow from the ground. If we were to fell the Amazon and send the wood of every of its trees to space, this wouldn't keep the sun burning for a day; but fueled by itself, it blazes for millennia.

And yet, this sun is like a small and flickering flame at the end of a match compared to the inferno of our Maker. His rays, which find their origin in his own being, infuse the universe with order and with life. Nothing is that does not originate in the divine being.

We add our prayer to the Psalmist's then, who says,

The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.¹

The heavenly Potentate does not need your prayers, nor your devotion; without our worship this morning, his eternal glory and Trinitarian happiness would be entirely undiminished. The Pacific Ocean does not suffer when tourists take a seashell home from their vacation; the Sahara desert does not weep when one of its desert hares dies. These great systems do not depend on any one of their inhabitants.

And one of the startling and yet wonderful facts of Christianity is this, that God does not depend on us. He does not depend on anything.

¹ Psalm 145:15-16 (ESV).

This point is well summarized by the hip-hop artist Timothy Brindle:

True indeed, there's nothing that you would need
As a Triune, loving community
The I AM tells his famous name
From the burning bush—the self-sustaining flame
Free in sovereignty, there's no doubtin'
He is all he needs, his own fountain²

God is self-sufficient.

And it is his self-sufficiency that explains the final proverb we will consider together, in Proverbs 18:12.

PROVERBS 18:12

It may not be immediately obvious how this proverb ties to God's self-sufficiency—but after we ask three questions of the text, the final question having two parts, I think you will see how it not only ties to, but is at the very heart of the verse.

And so let us ask our first question.

Look again at the verse. We read, “Before destruction a man's heart is haughty” and notice that the second line is parallel to the first, in its set up: “but humility comes before honor.” In both cases, something comes before something else. Pride comes before ruin, and humility comes before honor.

And Solomon in penning these lines no doubt wants us to infer not simply a relationship of *time*—pride happens in the time before ruin happening—but more a relationship of consequence—pride happens, and then what follows *because of* that pride, is ruin.

The question we press against this text, then, is: Why does pride result in ruin, and why does humility result in honor? Is there a mysterious and universal principle that binds these together; is there a natural or supernatural law that joins them?

And to this, we answer no. There is none that we are aware of. It is not some abstract principle or law that requires ruin to follow after pride, and honor to follow after humility.

The reason this proverb proves true is not because of a principle, but because of a person. And that person is God.

² “Self-Sufficiency,” *The Attributes of God* (Lamp Mode Recordings, 2011).

Proverbs 3 makes this very clear, in its 34th verse: “Toward the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.” Or, as both James and Peter understood the passage when they quoted it in their respective letters: “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”³

So, God enforces the fact of Proverbs 18:12. Pride results in ruin because the Judge of heaven passes that sentence and then executes that judgment; and, on the other hand, humility leads to honor because God leads the humble to honor. He opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.

So now we must press into our passage even further by another well-aimed question. It is another “Why?”

Here is our second question: Why does God make ruin the result of pride, and honor the result of humility?

And the answer, clearly, is that there is something in the nature of pride that arouses God’s dislike, and something in the nature of humility that wins his favor.

Which leads to our final question, which, as I said before, has two parts. This question, in its two parts, will actually comprise the rest of this message.

Here are the questions: First, what is the nature of pride, that God should tie it to ruin? And secondly, what is the nature of humility, that God should unite it to honor?

What is pride?

First then, what is pride? What is it about arrogance that earns the disapproval of Jehovah?

For the answer we return to our text and read it carefully, “Before destruction a man’s heart is haughty.”

The Hebrew behind that word, “haughty,” suggests elevation. The heart of the proud is a high heart. We speak in the same way in English: to us the proud are on their high horse, they’re high and mighty, and they look down on others, sometimes down their noses.

You might imagine then that pride is fundamentally too high an estimation of yourself. You think yourself to be above everyone else. And that is pride—but I do not think that is pride *fundamentally*, because something is underneath too high a view of yourself. If you should reach down now and take hold the upper layer of selfishness,

³ James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5.

and pull it off, you would find something else underneath it. And this something else is pride fundamentally, and it is this: a low view of God.

Calvin agrees when he writes:

So long as we do not look beyond the earth [that is, to God], we are quite pleased with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue; we address ourselves in the most flattering terms, and seem only less than demigods.⁴

Our high estimation of our own virtues is supported by a tiny view of the Lord—we think ourselves demigods because we do not see how far below the true God we are.

This is the nature of pride—it rests upon a low estimation of the Lord, a small view of God.

Can you see then why this sin above all others is, as one author says, “the essential vice, the utmost evil”?⁵ Can you see why God would so despise this sin, and forever attach to it, as its consequence, complete ruin—the “destruction” of our verse?

Because pride denies the self-sufficiency of God, and tries to claim for itself some of that sufficiency.

Pride reaches out a grimy hand to besmear the most precious possession of the greatest being—namely, the glory of God. Sin always offends God’s reputation, but pride beyond all others is a direct affront.

Only once to our knowledge was the throne of God actually under attack, when proud Lucifer a lead angel led one-third of his defecting comrades in war against it. Yet all pride is in effect the sword of Satan unsheathed against Yahweh; pride’s reasoning is always, “I more deserve to wear that crown than Christ does; and, Christ is small enough that I can take it.” To even begin such an imagination requires that first you have shrunk Christ in your own mind to a stature less than yourself—which, I might add, is a very low stature indeed.

When Nebuchadnezzar walked upon his roof and, surveying his nation, ascribed to himself the power which built it, his primary problem was not his faulty and overinflated ego; his primary problem was that he did not bear within his mind a notion of God high enough to extinguish that ego.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2015), 5.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2002), 103.

You remember how he strutted like a rooster over that rooftop—it was only fitting that God should cover him in feathers and banish him to the fields. And when the king returned, he ascribed to God all ruling power. “All the inhabitants of the earth,” he said, which would include himself, “are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.”⁶ But it required first a new and exalted view of God; that alone can sever the serpent head of pride, because that touches pride’s root.

Friends, if you want to be humble, take your cue from Scripture. This is a beast that cannot be confronted directly.

Imagine that you were to take seriously this sin, to detest it in your life, and to set yourself about ridding yourself of it. So, knowing it to be too high an estimation of yourself, you begin to think very low and degrading thoughts of yourself. You think, “I am a worm, I am nothing. I am useless and can do nothing right. I am a foul stench in the nostrils of God, etc., etc.”

Has this exercise made you a humble man or woman? No, no it has not. There are perhaps as many proud people who daily think themselves worthless as there are proud people who think themselves of great worth. Those who always muse on their own worthlessness betray themselves, for their activity proves they think themselves worthy enough to consume all of their thoughts in this manner.

No, you cannot attack pride directly. If you want to overthrow pride, you have to set an ambush behind the city. You have to get your mind away from yourself altogether.

Brothers and sisters, who of us is immune to the pulsings of pride? I know I am not. And when I am conscious of pride in myself, I sometimes feel nausea—pride is a sickness. Don’t you want to be free of the burden of pride?

I tell you, it will not happen so long as you gaze upon yourself. Look to Christ! I make it my ambition every Sunday to preach Christ and him crucified, to proclaim the glories of the Almighty and of the Lamb. There are many other interesting things we could speak of here, but that we avoid those topics is intentional. For our pride can suffer all of those subjects and not be stirred—but this one great subject, the uncontested King, the Creator of heaven and earth, this subject alone has the potency to suffocate our pride.

Do you tend to dominate conversations, especially with stories of yourself or facts that win you favor? You need something to talk of beside yourself, and the magnet which will finally yank your attention

⁶ Daniel 4:35.

off your ego must be God himself. Then you can think of God and of others in relation to him, and of this life in its relation to him, and, lastly of all, on occasion, of yourself in your relation to him.

The same has full application to you who are outside of Christ.

You can beat yourself up over every sin you commit, it means nothing to God. His concern is that you finally stop looking to yourself for righteousness, that you stop searching every corridor and cranny of your own heart for something that seems redeemable to offer God, and that you turn your eyes to him. He is not waiting for you to find something honorable in yourself, but to stop looking to yourself, and he will honor you.

Salvation is of the Lord—on the hill of the LORD it will be provided, and has been provided, on Golgotha. There the Lord himself, the sole never-taking always-giving God, has given his Son, his only Son, whom he loves. You feel you cannot come to God because you have nothing to offer him but your sin—and I say, you are more right than you understand. But what does he need? What could you give him that would be to his benefit? He wants no sacrifice, he owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

Pray with the sinner of Psalm 51,

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.⁷

Look away from yourself, force your gaze away for a moment, see the bronze serpent lifted in the desert and you will be healed; look to Christ and be saved, for he is God and there is no other. There is no Savior but him. There is no other name by which you may be saved. Do not go looking over the earth for the answer to your guilt; no eastern guru can provide it, no imam of North Africa, no merely human head of the visible²⁴church. Salvation is of the LORD—look to him, and him alone. This will be the mortal wound of your pride, but the birth of your humility, and the honor of eternal life.

What is humility?

So, seeing what pride is, a low view of God, we see also the answer to our second sub-question: What is humility?

As we read in our verse, “humility comes before honor,” and again we are helped by the word itself, by “humility.” As pride suggests elevation,

⁷ Psalm 51:16-17.

this word for humility can suggest being bowed down, as under an affliction.

And in light of what we have said of pride, it should not surprise us that Scripture places as the foundation of humility a high view of God.

We read in Proverbs 22:4, “The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life.” If you are reading in the ESV, you will find a footnote at the bottom, which explains that this might be read instead, “The reward for humility *is* the fear of the LORD...”⁸ Either translation is possible, and in either case, humility and the fear of the LORD are united together. The fear of the LORD either flows from, or is identical with, humility.

And what is this fear of the LORD? It is a high view of God.

We fear the LORD and so are humble when we acknowledge that he alone is the self-sufficient being, that all we have is from his hand, that all we are is of his grace.

This is why children are the model of humility we are offered in the Scriptures—because they acknowledge their dependence on others. The great King David subdued the Philistines and stretched his borders outward; but he could write, “like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.” For a weaned child sleeps in dependence; no infant can care for himself, but he can be at peace because he is cared for.

Jesus himself set a child among his disciples and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” And he added, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Greatest why? Because this child is so strong, and so competent, and so capable of great exploits for the Lord?

No! Children are weak, and limited in their abilities. But what does God care of our abilities? He is in no need of labor, but desires lowliness. If he wants to do something, he can do it without us. But always he wants us to recognize that it is he who has done it. And a child will recognize this, without qualm. A young child will not argue for his independence; it will not enter his mind. Of course his dad provides all that he needs, and protects him from all that might harm him; his dad is strong, and can do anything, and that does not upset him but is the ground of his comfort.

⁸ Emphasis mine.

Humility has much less to do with your view of yourself, and much more to do with your view of your Father, which will determine your view of yourself.

“...it is evident,” writes Calvin again, “that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.”⁹

You see then why, as our text asserts, humility unfolds into honor—the answer is clear in Yahweh’s promise, from 1 Samuel 2, “those who honor me I will honor.”¹⁰ Humility is the single state of mind appropriate to the creature, and when we choose it, we choose to honor our Maker.

The humble mind says, “What do I have that I have not received from God? And if I have received it, how could I boast as if I did not receive it?” The humble mind says, “I have labored more than others; nevertheless, it wasn’t me, but the grace of God that was with me.” The humble mind says, “Neither the one who sows nor the one who waters is anything, but God who gives the growth.”

The lowly loves to ascribe to God his worth, his honor as the sole originator of all, loves to sing with Paul, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.”¹¹

My brothers and my sisters, turn your eyes! Are you not yet disillusioned with this world, with the realm of mankind? Tell me that you have met a man or woman who has not yet disappointed you. Tell me that you have not yet come down from a mountain of temporary enthusiasm about life only to find the same slums at the base of the mountain that were there before you ascended. If this has depressed you, it is only because it is supposed to. The restlessness built into this world by God is meant to turn our eyes to him.

Tell me you have not grown weary of yourself yet, of your tendencies and deficiencies, which make futile your aspirations.

We were meant for more than this, for more than musing on ourselves and feeling grief. We were meant to gaze on the glory of God and find there a sufficiency that overflows our small brim.

Conclusion

I feel I may safely guess that some of you at least have come here burdened, with a burden based in yourself or in your circumstance.

⁹ *Institutes*, 5.

¹⁰ V. 30.

¹¹ Romans 11:36.

Because of your failings, or the faults of others, your hopes for your life are dissipating. And what do you have left?

In godly grief turn your eyes first downward, and acknowledge what you are, or rather, are not. But tarry there only a moment. If you are Christ's, then he has a greater purpose for you than contemplating the dust. Heed the counsel of an old Scotsman: "For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ."¹²

Study God. There is no surer antidote to pride. Take up the subject matter of divinity with an open mind; search the Scriptures and discover there afresh the God of Jacob. Dig again the old wells that have been covered up.

Make God the black hole of your attention; immerse yourselves in these things, addict yourselves to them. Ascend the mountain of God and, with face unveiled, behold the glory of Israel's King; when you descend not only will your face be different, but the faces of all others will look different as well. Your outlook on life will be a much more pleasant one, for it is better to have a self-sufficient, eternally self-delighted being at the core of your world, than to have something as small and wavering as yourself.

Let the little things of life be little things, friends, but never let them lift themselves haughtily against the knowledge of God. Whatever must be ousted from the throne room, oust it now! Whatever hobby or preoccupation prevents your attention from obsessing over the Holy One, let it be devoted to destruction. Choose the better part, beloved!

You who are the product of the Almighty, like children lift your eyes to him in full dependence. This is humility, and it is the greatest virtue, the one nearest the heart of God.

¹² Robert Murray M'Cheyne, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew Bonar (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1894), 293 qtd. in Tony Reinke, "The Purifying Power of Delight in Christ," [desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-purifying-power-of-delight-in-christ), <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-purifying-power-of-delight-in-christ>.