

## Proverbs: Pride and Humility

I'm not sure exactly how it started, but it began a couple of months ago. And I date it from Dan and Mia Dubei and their boys Mark and Jimmy coming to lunch. Mark and Jimmy got into a conversation about pride with our girls. Ever since then anything that any of us in the family has said that has even the smallest hint of pride or that could be interpreted using the harshest of criteria as pride, is met with a chorus of 'proud!'

I console myself that Lady Wisdom in Proverbs would agree. Solomon who wrote this book, compiled these proverbs to help his sons learn wisdom and navigate their way through life with skill. And to help them get a grasp of that at various points he presents wisdom as this wonderful lady who stands on the street corner urging and inviting Solomon's sons, and you and me to come, join the feast.

And in Proverbs 8:12-13 Lady Wisdom says: 'I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion. The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.' Lady Wisdom hates pride. Wisdom dwells with prudence but you won't find her sharing an apartment with pride. Being proud and being wise are mutually incompatible.

Which begs the questions, what does it mean to be proud? Because Lady Wisdom surely hasn't got every sense of the words 'pride' or 'proud' in her sights. A couple of months ago as I was tucking one of my daughters into bed I said to her 'daddy's proud of you poppet' and the reply was instantaneous 'pride's a sin dad'. But that's not the kind of pride Lady Wisdom is aiming at, so what is it?

### **The Varied Faces of Pride:**

For those of you who don't know, Su trained as a surgeon. And I know the real reason why. She might tell you something else. But I know the real reason. Su trained in surgery rather than medicine because of a medical condition called Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, or SLE for short. It's an autoimmune condition where the body produces a number of different antibodies that proceed to attack the patients own body. And whilst it's one disease it can show itself in many different ways, depending on how the patient is affected. And if you want to specialize in medicine rather than surgery as a career, you have to learn all these different antibodies and all their various effects and Su couldn't be bothered with that so she became a carpenter and plumber instead. The brains go into medicine, the brawn into surgery.

And pride, the pride that Lady Wisdom has in her sights, is like SLE. It's one disease, but it manifests itself in a multitude of different guises. And Proverbs points some of them out and we're going to look at just a selection of them.

### **1. The Pride of Success**

When we looked a few weeks back at what Proverbs has to say about money, we saw the danger of being tempted to get our security and our significance from possessions. Proverbs 18:11 says that 'a rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination.' Now if you begin to derive your significance from what you have, from your success, and how well you're doing, pride can get a foot-hold and you start to judge others by what they have, or don't have. Now

have you ever experienced that? Have you ever been on the receiving end of it, or found yourself doing it? 'Hey I'm not doing so badly, just been promoted above him', or that feeling you have when you drive away from visiting someone and you feel good because your house is larger than her's. If you know that sort of heart swelling based on you, not on gratitude, but on you, your success, what you possess, it's pride.

But the pride of success is a slippery slope, for two reasons. Firstly, you can begin to think you no longer need God like you used to (Proverbs 30:8-9). And if you're enjoying a period of success at work or at home at the moment, I want to encourage you, just check your heart. Are you consciously grateful to God, or is it getting all a bit me-centred? But secondly, what do you do when the success dries up? Proverbs 30:29-31 says 'three things are stately in their tread; four are stately in their stride: the lion, which is mightiest among beasts and does not turn back before any; the strutting rooster, the he-goat, and a king whose army is with him.' The king can strut and stride all the time his army is with him. But when the army turns on him, suddenly, he's not strutting anymore. And circumstances, like armies, have this uncomfortable habit of changing sides. And if circumstances change and pride has taken root in your heart, and your self-worth is tied up with your success, you've got a problem, because now either pride takes a crushing blow, or you have to struggle to keep up appearances. And Proverbs 13:7 describes just such a situation: 'One pretends to be rich, yet has nothing.' Rather than be brought low, the proud person, either in lifestyle or in speech struggles to maintain the pretense of success.

## **2. The Pride of the Mind:**

A second manifestation of pride that Proverbs points out is intellectual pride. Proverbs 18:2 'A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his own opinions'. When Su and I were junior doctors we had a colleague who we and just about everyone else dreaded to be on-call with. She was junior like us, but no-one could teach her anything. She was unteachable. And ultimately pride is at the root of that attitude. It may be subtle or less than subtle but it thinks 'Hey, they can't teach me anything, I've got nothing to learn from them'.

You see, whilst the person whose pride manifests in success thinks of themselves as being self-sufficient and having made it based on money, possessions or status, the intellectually proud person considers themselves self-sufficient in the area of their mind. And that's dangerous ground, because that sort of attitude quickly morphs into what Proverbs calls the Scoffer – Proverbs 21:24 'scoffer is the name of the arrogant haughty man who acts with arrogant pride.' If you allow yourself to become proud in the area of your mind, and you cease to be teachable it's not long before you're scoffing at the opinion of others. And the scoffer in Proverbs is not someone you want to emulate, because in the end he ends up scoffing at truth itself.

So let me ask you, do you ever think like that at school, work, or elsewhere? Do you see any germinating seed of unteachability in your heart? And specifically, what about the truth of God's word? Is there any hint of the scoffer? Do you ever find yourself thinking about something the Bible teaches 'I can't accept that, I'll

leave that commandment, or that instruction on the side, these were primitive people.' That's the pride of the mind.

### **3. The Pride of Offense:**

A third face of pride that Proverbs warns us against is the pride that manifests itself when you get offended at something or someone. Proverbs 18:19 'A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarrelling is like the bars of a castle.' Now maybe you've experienced that: either you've seen it play out with a family member, or you've managed to offend someone and reaped the consequences in the way they shut down on you, or you've taken offense at something and emotionally you know you're now like a walled, fortress against that person.

But ask yourself, where does that reaction come from? When we react like that, it's really coming from pride within. Someone says something or does something and it hurts our pride: 'I'm not going to be spoken to like that! Who does she think she is?' So we shut down emotionally and freeze them out. Our pride has been assaulted and pride doesn't like that so it reacts.

Now just like the other two, this has consequences. Firstly, there are the broken relationships, but secondly, if we allow offense to take root and a root of bitterness to get established, it's not long before you're wanting to get your own back, and Proverbs warns against that. Proverbs 20:22 'Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the Lord, and He will deliver you.' In other words, don't go down the vicious vortex of taking offense and getting your own back. It is pride pressing the self-destruct button. Paul says in Romans 12:18 "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people". Church, you can't do much about the other person, but you can ensure you don't take offense.

### **4. The Pride of the Tribe:**

A fourth area of pride that Proverbs addresses is what I'm going to call the Pride of the Tribe. Proverbs 21:4 'Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin.' Now when Solomon talks about haughty eyes he's not talking about how your eyes appear, like they're too close together. Haughty eyes aren't about how you look, but how you look with your eyes. He means eyes that look down at other people, that think they're a cut above everyone else. And Proverbs says that haughty eyes and a proud heart are the lamp of the wicked. They see life through those proud eyes and that proud heart.

And that can especially be the case with outsiders. Just think about it and see if you recognize the scenario: it could be at work with your colleagues, or your friends at school, or in social and ethnic circles. And people are either in or out of the tribe. Those who are in are ok. They're one of us. But those who are outside the circle – the work colleague on the edge, the awkward kid at school, someone from a different ethnic or social background, those people we look down on. That's haughty eyes, viewing life and others through pride. If you want to know if this has a root in your heart just consider whether you're in the habit of excluding someone from the circle, because you look down on them. And tragically churches are not immune to this stuff. Have you ever looked down on a non-christian and tut-tutted about their behaviour? It's pride. And the pride in

my heart thinks I'm so good and it so easily forgets I am saved by the grace of Jesus Christ and don't deserve any of his goodness anymore than anyone else.

### **5. The Pride of Personal Sovereignty:**

One final face of pride is the pride of personal sovereignty. Now that's a big title, but it means the pride of thinking you're the boss, that you're in control of your life and your destiny. Proverbs 27:1 'Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.' Have you ever met someone like that - who boasts and brags about their plans and all the stuff they're going to do in the future? Proverbs says they've lost touch with reality. Because the reality is you and I are not the boss. Now, our pride tells us we are, but we're not the king. There is One who sits on the throne of time and eternity controlling what's going to happen, but it's not you or me. And whilst Proverbs says it's good to plan, it's planning our futures in humble submission of our lives to the Ultimate Sovereign. The humble person knows who's boss and it isn't him, regardless of what pride says otherwise.

So, for the final pride check: when you're planning, how are you doing that? When you run through your dreams for the future, is it about you and what you want and what you're going to do, or is it in humble submission to the Father?

The varied faces of pride: and Proverbs is clear - allow them to get a foot-hold in your heart and danger is lurking.

### **Choose your opponent wisely**

When you read the book of Proverbs and start noting those proverbs that talk about pride, one theme hits you pretty quickly, and that is the danger that lies ahead for the proud person. Proverbs 11:2 'When pride comes, then comes disgrace.' Proverbs 16:18 'Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.' Proverbs 18:12 'Before destruction a man's heart is haughty.' Proverbs 29:23 'One's pride will bring him low.'

It's like a man walking toward a cliff edge, striding out seemingly oblivious to what lies ahead. He thinks he's having a mountain top experience, but in reality he's heading towards a sheer drop. And on either side of him are all these warning signs saying danger ahead, turn back. Will he pay attention to them or will he just carry on walking? And Proverbs says 'that's the proud person'. He becomes careless. He forgets his own mortality. After all, he's successful, what harm can befall him? No-one can teach him anything, so why read the signs? He's the king, and kings aren't accountable to anyone, he can do what he likes. So he keeps on walking, and the cliff edge is getting ever closer.

I'm only 40, and I don't pretend to have lived a particularly exciting life, but I can look back and say that when I have fallen into my worst seasons of sin, pride has so often been at the root of it. A sense that I was above the law, or that I had a right to be offended, or that I didn't need to be accountable, or that what others thought of me mattered more; or that I was strong enough to resist in myself. Proverbs is so right. Pride precedes the fall.

But what? Why is that the case? Well pride puts us at risk, by convincing us we can go without protective relationships or habits like prayer, reading the bible and meeting with other Christians. It puts us at risk by making us think we're immune to the temptations of others or that we can play with fire and not get burnt.

But the ultimate reason why pride precedes a fall is that God engineers the fall. Listen to Proverbs 8:13 again, Wisdom speaking: 'Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech *I hate.*' Proverbs 15:25 '*the Lord* tears down the house of the proud.' Proverbs 6:16-17 says 'There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him...' and the first on the list is haughty eyes. It's God who brings about the fall. And either we humble ourselves under God's mighty hand or God will do the humbling for us.

The apostle Peter, who uses Proverbs 3:34 as a basis, writes in 1 Peter 5:5 "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." And the wise person doesn't want God as their opponent. If you want to live your life with wisdom, God is not the opponent to be choosing. In the battle between you and the Sovereign King of heaven and earth there is only ever going to be one winner, now matter how highly you think of yourself.

And so both the Book of Proverbs and the apostle Peter offer a better way. It's make pride your enemy, and not your heavenly Father. 1 Peter 5:6 'Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God -(choose humility rather than pride, if you are conscious of pride in your heart repent of it)- so that at the proper time He may exalt you.' You see, whilst God opposes the proud, he also gives grace to the humble. And Proverbs says that rather than a cliff edge lying in store for the humble, honour lies in wait for the person who pursues humility: Proverbs 15:33 'The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honour.' Proverbs 22:4 'The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honour and life.' The fear of the Lord, loving God so much you don't want to sin against him, seeing Him as he really is and yourself as you really are, humbling yourself to be taught by God, by life and by others, puts you on the path to real blessing.

It's not God you want as your opponent, it's pride. God you want as your friend and saviour and king and reason to live for.

### **Living for Another's Glory**

Proverbs 25:27 says 'It is not good to eat much honey nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory.' Now what have honey and glory got to do with each other? Well, honey is wonderful, but too much of it and that feeling of delight at breakfast soon changes to having had enough if you keep going, you're going to end up feeling sick. And Solomon says living for your own glory is the same. If you make yourself the thing you glory in, if you live for nothing higher than yourself, if it's you that you take pride in, if your sense of self-worth is based on you and how good you are, you might feel great to start with, and pride will tell you you're ok and certainly better than others, but in the end it makes you sick.

And through the prophet Jeremiah God tells us whose glory we should live for: Jeremiah 9:23-24 "Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord." Don't glory, don't boast, don't get proud about yourself and don't get your sense of self worth from yourself. Glory in me.

And the apostle Paul knew what that meant. Listen to what he says in 1 Timothy 1:15-16 'The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy.' Paul, who knew the pride of success – he finished top of his class, and the pride of the mind, he had a phenomenal brain, and the pride of offense – he hated this new sect called Christians with murderous hatred, and the pride of the tribe – he was a Jew and a Pharisee, had come to the point where he knew there was nothing in himself of which to be proud, he was the worst of sinners.

But that didn't make him morose or assume a martyr mentality of false, sickly piety. It made him glad because he realized all the more what Jesus Christ had done for him. That for him, this proud, arrogant, blaspheming, murderous Pharisee, Christ had loved him and died on the cross for him, paying the price for every one of Paul's proud thoughts and actions. And now he could say 'But I received mercy.'

Church, the same is true for you and me. As CJ Mahaney says 'I'm the worst sinner I know' because I am more painfully aware of my sin than anyone else's. And when you see yourself before a holy and just God as you really are, with all your pride in all its manifestations, you realize that there is absolutely nothing to be proud of. But then you look to the cross of Jesus and you see the Son of God dying in your place, *humbling himself* to the very point of death, for the sake of your pride, bearing the wrath of God that we deserve so that we go free. And pride gives way to grateful, thankful, joyful humility and with Paul we can say 'I have received mercy' the mercy of a forgiving God who gives grace to the humble.

And having seen the end of your old proud life in the cross, you can respond to God's call to live for his glory and not your own. But you can't do that in your own strength. If you could it would simply be another reason to be proud. You can only do that as you yield your life to Jesus and His Holy Spirit: 'Come', Jesus says, 'come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me (- learn from me what it is to be humble) - for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls' (Matt 11:28-29). That is who to live for and that is how to do it.