

OVERCOMING

pride

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Pride, simply put, is the belief that one is better or more important than others.

It manifests itself in a haughty or arrogant spirit that robs one of the desire to put God's honour first and the interests of others before self; in short, it renders one ineffective in God's service. The Bible is replete with warnings against allowing one's service and testimony – whether wilfully or unwittingly – to be tragically marred by pride.

Pride Disqualifies

Proverbs 16:18 sombrely testifies: "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." The apostle Paul, in delineating the spiritual qualifications of an elder, specifically warns against appointing "a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:6). This indicates that even a fervent, promising Christian who is spiritually gifted, if preoccupied with an overwhelming sense of self-importance, can destroy his usefulness for the Lord and disqualify himself as an exemplary influence. Similarly, the apostle John, in his third epistle, "wrote unto the church" to caution her against the arrogant actions and abuse of authority by a self-elevating, domineering church leader (cf. 3 John 9-10). John deplores such a spirit of pride, which certainly disqualifies anyone from God's service.

It goes without saying that even God's people are not exempt from this sin rearing its ugly head in their lives. There is the constant danger that anyone of us could easily fall into the clutches of pride. Before pride overcomes us, let us overcome pride. The apostle James, in his epistle, wants his readers to know how they may overcome pride.

Recognise Ongoing Battle with Pride

Scripture testifies that "the spirit ... in us lusteth to envy" (James 4:5). The word "spirit" here refers to the immaterial part of man's being, as distinct from man's body. The spirit is the seat of a man's intellect, emotion and will, which is said to have a strong inclination towards "envy". Man's natural tendency is to resent others having a better deal than oneself. At the root of envy is preoccupation with self-elevation – in other words, pride! It is therefore not surprising to note that in many Greek writings, the word "envy" has often been used in close association with pride.

James knew too well that though we are a new creature in Christ, the wretched flesh (with its downward pull towards sin, including the pride of life) is still present in us, ever lurking to bring us "into captivity

to the law of sin" (cf. Romans 7:23, 25). James is here reminding us that as long as we are still in this flesh while living on this earth, we have to constantly contend with this craving to "be number one"! As natural as a heavy body would move downward, so is our bent towards "the pride of life". Realising this ongoing spiritual battle with pride will keep us vigilant in overcoming pride each time it "pops its head up".

But we are not without help. Being "partakers of the divine nature" through Christ (2 Peter 1:4), we need no longer be controlled by the flesh but by the Holy Spirit who has made His permanent dwelling in us. But what if weakness and inability to overcome overwhelm us? James adds in 4:6, "But he giveth more grace." God sees to it that His grace is adequate to meet our testings. It is the same grace which God assures would be "sufficient" for Paul when he was greatly weighed down in bearing his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Whenever the pride of life comes in strong upon us, let us remember that we have a strong and mighty God who gives and assures us of His grace. The more we are struck by our sense of inadequacy, the more acutely conscious we are of our absolute dependence on God, and the more freely God's grace flows towards us. Thus, when we are weak in ourselves, we are then most strong in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:10).

Submit / Draw Nigh to God

James further says in 4:7, "Submit yourselves therefore to God." The linking word "therefore" signifies a consequent action or event from the preceding discussion, i.e. God's

bestowing of grace. The word "submit" means to place or set oneself under another. It signifies that an agent is acting upon the subject. It has the idea of one controlling the other, the superior controlling the inferior. James is saying that our lives are to be governed by God's will and pleasure. According to James, one's submission to God hinges on the twin commands: "Resist the devil" and "Draw nigh to God" (vv. 7b, 8a). One could not exist without the other.

Now, to resist means to stand against, oppose, withstand, reject, or refuse. This word carries with it a conscious, deliberate and urgent action on the part of the subject and there has to be no middle ground. We can never put ourselves in submission to God if we do not resist the devil. Sadly, many of God's people have succumbed to Satan's ploys and deceptions. One of Satan's chief avenues of temptation is through pride. That was how Satan "provoked David to number Israel" in an act of foolish pride (1 Chronicles 21:1, 8). That would also have been how Satan attempted to induce Paul to "be exalted above measure" (2 Corinthians 12:7). And that will also be how Satan continues to make proud suggestions to us which are very tempting.

The devil knows how and when to stir up our thoughts, plant insinuations or offer cunning suggestions. He can use events, people, successes, failures, our service, prayers, etc. to instil pride in us. To all these, Satan is extremely observant and he will unscrupulously manipulate such things to make great influence upon our lives. However, the Bible tells us

that we must resist such thoughts, insinuations and suggestions by Satan. When a Christian resists the devil, God's Word promises that "he will flee from you". Whatever power Satan may have, the Christian can be absolutely sure that he has been given the ability to overcome that power. To "resist the devil" is the only way to get rid of him!

Equally important is to "draw nigh to God". When James exhorts his readers to draw nigh to God, it implies there is a distance, gap or separation. Indeed, "the proud he knoweth afar off" (Psalm 138:6b). Whenever pride (or any sin) stirs within us, it has the effect of separating us from God. The infinite, eternal, unchangeable, thrice-holy God, whom no fallen creature can ever approach, stands at an unbridgeable distance from sinful men. The only way to draw nigh to God is to "cleanse your hands ... and purify your hearts" (v. 8b) through Christ.

The "hands" signify one's outer behaviour. They need cleansing because they are dirty. Whatever we do that would boost our ego and give us occasions for outward shows of arrogance will cause our hands to become dirty. Our hands are dirtied when we say things that would put a person down and lift ourselves up, or when we do things to oppress other people and put ourselves way above the rest. Cleansing of hands thus signifies that we should ask for the forgiveness of our sins.

Moreover, James adds to his exhortation the importance to purify the hearts. The heart is where the stimuli of one's behaviour are stored. An inflated estimation of self can so easily arise from that "storehouse"!

To call people to cleanse their hands without the call to purify the heart is pointless. Let us, like the psalmist, cry out, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me" (Psalm 139:23-24), whereupon we must acknowledge our sins. Let us pray that God will "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins (which include the subtle sin of pride); let them not have dominion over me" (Psalm 19:13). Only then can we be acceptable in God's sight and come boldly unto His throne of grace. And the promise of God is that if we draw near to Him with clean hands and pure hearts, He will draw near to us.

Bear with Mean Things / Experiences

In v. 9, James highlights a rather surprising God-ordained means of preventing Christians from being lifted up with pride – afflictions! "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep". This goes against the grain of the world's thinking. Unbelievers, when suffering afflictions, would cry foul and protest against the infringement of their human rights. Mourning and weeping are viewed as base and mean things, which are frowned upon as uncivilised and incompatible with high society. However, James stresses the need of such experiences in our lives. Afflictions have a preventive purpose – to take away our self-sufficiency and prevent us from being too cocksure of ourselves. Mourning and weeping are a sign of our soul's sensitivity to our sins and the sins of others, as well as a realisation of our human frailty and depravity.

This is a hard lesson to accept, though a greatly profitable one. The example of Peter bears this out. When Peter failed to take the Lord Jesus' warning seriously but chose rather to appear self-confident about his devotion to Christ (Luke 22:31-33), his boasting set him up for the most humiliating experience of his self-assured life: he denied his Master thrice! He was so filled with remorse that he "went out, and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). Ironically, such "mourning and weeping" made him realise how weak and feeble he was, and how misguided his self-assuredness had been! Being devoid of self-boasting, he was later restored and made useful in service again.

James' point here is most instructional. Since afflictions have the profitable effect of keeping our ego in check and preventing us from thinking too highly of our position, lot, ability, etc., a ready disposition to bear hardships and toil (i.e. to be afflicted) will stand us in good stead in our Christian struggle against pride.

Be Humbled in God's Sight

Recognising the ongoing battle with pride, coupled with submitting and drawing nigh to God, as well as bearing with mean things and experiences will, according to James, then lead us to be humbled "in the sight of the Lord" (v. 10a). The Greek verb translated as "humble yourselves" is in the passive voice, which literally means "be humbled" or "allow yourselves to be humbled". This tells us that there is an external agent acting upon us, i.e. God Himself.

In other words, we are the recipients of God's grace working in our lives. We cannot actively do something to be rid of pride; it is something which God does to us. God acts and brings circumstances, events into our lives; we respond by being willing to accept our lot – that is how we are made humble in the process.

The promise is this: if we allow ourselves to be humbled under the mighty hand of God, "he shall lift you up" (v. 10b). Oh, what amazing paradox! If we are willing to be placed in a lower position by God, God will in due time exalt us. This exaltation is not a deliberate, conscious self-exaltation. It is effected by external means, and will not require any scheming or manipulation on our part. It is something that we do not seek out, but is something bestowed upon us, by virtue of God's wonder-working grace through our Lord Jesus Christ. Realising that we can do nothing without Christ, let us have this mindset of the psalmist: "LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me" (Psalm 131:1).

Conclusion

Truly, the sin of pride is a very dangerous sin to trifle with. It is the cause of Lucifer's downfall. Almost every other sin could be linked to the sin of pride. But thank God that He has not left us without instruction or warning against this treacherous "enemy" lurking within us. Take heed – let us overcome pride before pride overcomes us!