

Pride

It may seem very strange to discuss pride as a kind of problem. After all, in contemporary North American culture we encourage our children to take pride in their work and to be proud of what they have achieved. We also believe that those who do not do this will not be well. We expect that low self-esteem will lead to a life of self-defeating attitudes and that those with such attitudes will not be happy and will be easily manipulated and used by others.

To avoid misunderstanding the New Testament's teaching on this subject, it will be helpful to look more closely at the terms we are using.

- In contemporary English, we use the word “pride”
 - mostly in a good sense to mean “healthy self-respect” and
 - less commonly in a bad sense to mean “puffed up, full of oneself,” i.e. excessively self-important (which may seem foolish, but is hardly evil or dangerous).

- In Greek, the opposite is true.
 - The word *hyperēphania* (ὑπερηφάνια; “arrogant pride”) only rarely occurs in a good sense (“outstanding, splendid,” i.e. pre-eminent and distinguished in courage, wisdom, etc.).
 - Normally in Greek literature (and always in the New Testament), *it has only a bad meaning* (“making a show of one’s supposed excellence, so that one is seen to be superior to others and to be above them”)
 - The form of the Greek word itself points in the same direction:
 - *hyper*=above and beyond (what another is or can do)
 - *-phania* probably derives from *phaino* “appear, show, make manifest,”
 - Cf. Bechtel, *Lexilogus* (s.v. ὑπερηφανέω), cited in H. Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, v. 2, Heidelberg, 1970, 968.
 - so *hyperēphania* would mean to mean to “appear to be above and beyond other people.”
 - Cf. G. Abbot Smith, *A Manual Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1922, 458 (“showing oneself above others”) and P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots*, Paris, 1999, 1158 (“celui qui se montre’ ou ‘veux se montrer supérieur”).

- **What makes pride (*hyperēphania*) wrong and destructive is that**
 - **(1) the person who is proud claims more for himself/herself than is actually the case, which is a sin against truth.**
 - The person makes the most of his own advantages, abilities and achievements but ends up **overstating what he/she actually has done or is able to do**.
 - Pride “causes us to overestimate our abilities, to exaggerate our achievements, to inflate our importance...lying to ourselves about what we actually are capable of doing” (Weber, *The Capital Sins*, 13-14)
 - **The person who is proud attributes only to himself/herself** (and thus takes credit for) **things that belong (at least in part) to God** and/or to other people.
 - Focused solely upon themselves, they appear to be unaware of the need for gratitude for what they have received.
 - Contrast the confession of what God has given, with gratitude, in 1 Chron. 29:10-16.
 - “The proud person attributes achievements and virtues to personal powers and blames moral lapses on someone or something beyond one’s control” (Weber, *The Capital Sins*, 15)
 - The humble can honestly and openly acknowledge both their own limitations and failings and also the goodness of what God has given.
 - **(2) the person puts himself/herself up by putting others down** (a negative contrast that exalts oneself by making another person less), which is a sin against love.
 - This becomes evident in the way he/she thinks and speaks about other people.
 - The proud person may speak very easily about his/her own position, power or wealth, but when he/she speaks about other people, the way he/she speaks shows that he/she thinks little of others and disregards them.

- With an unchecked use of language, one speaks from a position of superiority (believing one has greater strength, power or ability).
- One speaks in way that injures or harms or wounds the other person by finding fault with them, condemning them and making less of them with no just cause.
- The way one speaks about other people is dismissive, scornful or sarcastic, showing that one disdains or despises them or has contempt for them.
 - Thus, the active form of the verb= “be arrogant to” (ἐπὶ τινα) (Neh. 9:10 LXX), while to be on the receiving end of this (=passive form of the verb) is “to be despised” (4 Mc. 5:21); see J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint: Part II K-Ω*, Stuttgart, 1996, 489.
 - Cf. The definitions found in J.H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4 ed., Edinburgh, n.d., 641a for
 - *hyperēphania* (“arrogant pride”) as “the characteristic of one who, with a swollen estimate of his own powers or merits, looks down on others and even treats them with insolence and contempt”
 - *hyperēphanos* (“arrogantly proud”) as “with an overweening estimate of one’s means or merits, despising others or even treating them with contempt”
 - The rhetorician Eudemus (A.D. 2?; Περὶ λέξεων ῥητορικῶν, folio 3, line 30), defining the word *agerōchia* (being “high-minded” or “lordly,” in the negative sense of being haughty, insolent and arrogant), connects this closely with *hyperēphania*.
 - For example, one
 - dismisses those who disagree with one as “stupid”;
 - looks down on people who wear less fashionable clothes or drive older, less impressive cars
 - feels ashamed of family members who are less well-off or might be seen as less sophisticated or less successful.

- **(3) the person who is proud does not and will not accept limits**
 - He/she
 - resents and disdains limits and feels himself/herself to be above them
 - The grammarian Philoxenus (first century B.C.; fr. 613, lines 2-4), in defining the word *hyperbasia* (“going beyond” = “transgression”), defined *hyperephania* in terms of rejecting limits:
 - “‘Transgression’: literally, of those who go beyond the boundaries [or: limits] proper to them , and the same is true of arrogant pride (*hyperēphania*); for the arrogant (*hyperēphanoi*) are determined to do something beyond themselves.”
 - The more one is gripped by pride, the more one rejects all idea of obligation to others
 - will not accept subjection to God or others and cannot bear to see others honored before or above oneself
 - This is true both
 - because the proud person is primarily concerned for himself/herself and
 - because he/she is accustomed to looking down on other people engaged in similar efforts.
 - The consequence of being unwilling to accept limits is that one
 - becomes increasingly cut off from others and alienated from them, “defensively circling the wagons to protect” and promote “the inflated self while keeping others out” (Weber, *The Capital Sins*, 15)
 - becomes increasingly cut off from reality, leading one to think of oneself as being more than what is normally human.
 - Pride is a sickness that
 - starts with imagining oneself to be self-sufficient,

- then beginning to believe that one is above reproach (one will not accept questions, disagreement or criticism)
- and ends by thinking that one is more like God than man and will never be or experience anything less (one cannot fail, be wrong or suffer harm).
 - Is. 14:13-14: “I shall rise up to the heavens. I shall be like the Most High”
 - Compare the temptation of Adam and Eve in Gen. 3:5: “You shall be as gods”

When pride leads one to imagine that one is more like God than man, a great darkness comes over one’s mind and one loses any sense of the true God and one’s own true self.

- The grammarian Herennius Philo (A.D. 1-2; *De diversis verborum significationis [epitome operis Herenii Philonis]*, s.v. *aponoia*) speaks of arrogant pride as involving a loss of all sense and a being a kind of madness which one brings upon oneself:

“Loss of all sense (*aponoia*) differs from lack of understanding (*anoia*). Loss of all sense is a kind of madness and an arrogant pride which is to be hated.”
- Cf. Ob. 3 LXX: “The pride of your heart (ὕπερηφανία τῆς καρδίας) has deceived you...you who make your home on the heights.”

The mind that is darkened in this way by pride is

- very quick to take offense and
- moves rapidly from hurt pride to anger and mockery to violence.

This is precisely what we see in the Gospels (in the Scripture passages read during Lent), where Jesus’ demand for repentance meets with resistance and then hurt pride leads to mockery and finally to murder. And here we see that that pride which in our lives we minimize, excuse and defend is precisely that same pride which nailed Jesus to a cross and mocked him while he bled.

It is our pride which brings us into the Gospel story and makes us not just onlookers, but participants in what happened there.

(*Lectio divina* on Gospel passages where pride leads to the mockery of Christ both before and after the crucifixion)