

Special Section: Humility

Here Comes The Pride

How to recognize and defeat the stealth sin

By David W. Henderson



Illustration by David Slonim
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A couple of years ago, I received three unique invitations within a few weeks of each other. I was asked to lead an all-church retreat for a prominent church; I was invited to preach at the 100th-anniversary celebration of a prestigious Midwestern school; and I was asked to spend a day with a small group of influential leaders within my denomination.

As a person who wants to have the broadest possible impact for the kingdom of God, I drooled at all three opportunities, thinking of how each might have the potential, indirectly or directly, of influencing hundreds of people.

There were two problems: First, all three events were on the same day. Second, that day was two days before my wife's scheduled C-section with our fourth child. A problem—not insurmountable, but a problem.

I prayed, called some godly friends for their counsel, and agonized over the decision.

Gradually I realized that making the broadest possible impact for the kingdom was not the only motive shaping my desire to say yes to these invitations. I was also motivated by something else: me, my reputation, my kingdom. This was a matter not of ministry but of pride.

What comes to mind when you hear the word *pride*? Cockiness? Aloofness? Arrogance?



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While those horizontal attitudes of conceit toward others are certainly part of the Bible's use of the word *pride*, it is the vertical dimension—our attitude toward God—that is the more important. For from Scripture's perspective, pride is a spiritual issue, not a relational one.

Forgetting and Remembering

Two word pairs from Scripture help us better understand this vertical aspect of pride. The first comes from Deuteronomy.

Having finally finished their wearying laps around the wilderness, the Israelites now stand looking over the fence at the cushy homes, manicured lawns, and fertile fields that will soon be theirs. But before they move in, Moses warns them of a new danger that lurks.

The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land. . . a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing . . . When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God . . . Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied . . . then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God . . . You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth . . . If you ever forget the LORD your God . . . I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed.

—*Deut. 8:7–19*

Israel is about to face a danger more destructive than starvation, heat stroke, or scorpion bite. The new enemy? A spiritual disease called pride. Pride is amnesia of the soul. It is forgetting God. "When I fed them," God says elsewhere of the Israelites, "they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me" (Hosea 13:6).

Forgetting can take two forms. For those who stand smugly outside the faith, it is the defiant act of dismissing God. This person says, "There is no god" (Psalm 14:1) or, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god" (Ezekiel 28:2). Adam and Eve's long descent started when they heard these slithery, seductive words: "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5).

For those of us who stand even more smugly inside the faith, pride is the casual act of disregarding God. In our thoughts, "there is no room for God" (Psalm 10:4). Many of us are guilty of this practical atheism. While we profess faith, we live unbelief. We shift ultimate confidence from God to ourselves. In the process, our lives become monuments

of self-reliance, universes from which God has been squeezed. Sure, we believe in Him. But actively rely on Him? Naah.

Pride is acting—whether we openly deny Him or merely ignore Him—as though we have no need of God. It is not merely an inflated ego; it is an inflated soul. It is arrogance toward God. And arrogance is a good word for pride; its root is in the verb to *arrogate*, which is to claim for ourselves what is not rightly ours.

Coming out of seminary, I possessed big plans for how I would serve God and make an impact for the kingdom. I was confident, capable . . . and proud. I applied to serve as senior pastor in a number of churches, only to be ignored. I had arrogated a place of importance in God’s redemptive purposes.

God had other plans. He led me to a small church as an associate pastor—a place where He could begin to break me of my pride. He told me: “David, right now I am more concerned with what I am going to do in you than with what I am going to do through you. And this is where I want to do it.”

Sometimes we need our memories jogged about who God is and who we are.

Lowly and Lofty

When the Bible talks of pride, it often uses language that seems more to do with altitude than with attitude—high, lofty, raised, exalted, lifted up, puffed up, haughty. We reflect the same orientation in English when we call someone upper-level, top dog, king of the hill, uppity, above others.

The best and strongest are always over us, the worst and weakest below us. God (even though the language is nonsensical on a spinning planet) is above us. Beneath us, on the other hand, is the domain of dirt clods and devils—the underworld that Satan occupies.

Little wonder, then, that pride is connected to elevation. For if I am high up, then I am on the same level as God—and thus equal to and no longer in need of Him. And if I am raised up, then I am above other people. I see them as beneath me, undeserving of my regard or concern.

Pride is the presumption of elevation, the arrogation of altitude. It is the sin of taking up residence on the top floor of the spiritual realm, at an address higher than the clouds.

I remember driving home with my wife from Grace Chapel one Sunday, telling her all that was wrong with Gordon MacDonald’s sermon that morning. The introduction lacked oomph, eye contact was spotty, his application was fuzzy—on and on I went.

“Do you suppose,” she asked quietly as we neared our apartment, “that you’re being critical because you are jealous of him?” I had just spent an hour cutting down a man who had been for me a model of godly ministry. I was lifting myself up by dragging him down. Ouch.

Come on down!

I challenge you to find a sin that does not spill out of pride. Envy. Anger. Greed. Lust. Ambition. Ingratitude. You name it. They all find their root here, in this “Mother and Queen of all vices,” as Gregory the Great put it. Pride is The Sin, the plant from which all other sins are mere offshoots.

And God hates no sin more. His choicest words of fury are reserved for this transgression. He hates pride (Proverbs 8:13), detests pride (Proverbs 16:5), abhors pride

(Amos 6:8). He will not tolerate it. Those who are proud He will cut down, humble, bring low, cast down, crush.

One thing matters to God: our relationship with Him. Anything that undermines that—even His own blessings—He will strip away from us at a moment's notice. He wants us to remember. To remember who we are. And to remember who He is.

Hence the toppling of a tower called Babel, whose builders said, "Let us build ourselves a tower that reaches to heaven, and so make a name for ourselves" (see Genesis 11:1–9). Hence the succession of one prideful king after another in 2 Chronicles, heads of state who raised themselves up and were pushed back down with all the speed and pomp of a jack-in-the-box in the hands of a three-year-old. And hence the promise we associate with the coming Messiah: "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low" (Isaiah 40:4). God is in the business of breaking us of our prideful disregard of Him.

I love how one writer put this: "Man is happy when he has a utensil that remains whole and is saddened when it breaks. God, on the other hand, whose most cherished possession is a man's heart, delights when it is broken in humility."

Pride Detectors

Pride is especially dangerous for three reasons. First, almost anything can become a source of pride—even good things. If pride is acting as though we have no need of God, then anything that breeds self-sufficiency or deadens us to our need of God is a potential culprit.

Second, pride is never more than two inches away, even for the most godly. Alexander Solzhenitsyn once remarked that pride grows in the human heart like lard on a pig. We are all susceptible.

Third, pride is generally invisible to those in its grip. Anger, gluttony, lust, envy—all other sins are more flagrant and more easily detected. Pride is the stealth sin, slipping in under our radar.

How, then, can we recognize pride in ourselves?

- A spotty prayer life suggests I am not actively relying on God, nor aware of my need for Him.
- Weariness is often the result of trying to do more than God intends, which means I am not letting Him order my day.
- Anger can mean I am not trusting God's sovereign plan and timing, and am trying to take control from Him.
- A critical spirit, the sorry act of bringing others down in order to lift up myself, often points to an inflated sense of self.
- A defensive reaction to criticism, despondency after failure, and the inability to laugh at my mistakes all suggest that I am taking myself too seriously and thinking of myself too highly.
- Taking responsibility for success, accomplishment, or financial prosperity may mean I have lost sight of God's gracious and undeserved provision.
- Impatience about having to listen, wait, serve, be anonymous, or be led by someone else all hint at an overdeveloped sense of importance.

But one of the best clues to pride is uncovered when we are honestly confronted by others. When someone gets up the nerve to challenge you on your presumption—as

Azariah did with Uzziah in 2 Chron. 26:16–20—swallow hard and listen carefully. Could this be God’s voice?

I still remember the exact spot where this happened once to me. I was coming out of Beverly onto the Salem drawbridge. In my car were two women I didn’t know well, fellow students at Gordon-Cromwell. I was giving them a ride home from school. We’d been talking about something—I don’t remember what—when from the backseat came these cutting words: “You are so arrogant; you know that? You act as though you are God’s gift to the world.” It took everything in me to keep from letting them out right there in the channel! But I listened—and there was truth in those words, unkind as they were.

Pride Busters

If identifying pride is tough, avoiding it is even harder—but not impossible. Here are some steps that might help.

- Ask God to make you unimpressed by your successes, accomplishments, and position.
- Express to God a willingness to remain in humble, invisible positions of service.
- Take up residence in a biblical worldview.
- Keep godly company.
- Get in over your head in ministry ventures. Let God stretch you.
- Spend time in the mountains or at the ocean.
- Give away a lot of money.
- Confess your pride to a trustworthy friend.
- Keep mindful of your under Godness. Put a note on your mirror or in your DayTimer that says, “Look up,” or “Seek His face.”
- Pray John Wesley’s prayer every morning: “Let me be nothing and Christ be all in all.”
- Persist in seeking God. Ask Him daily for His strength, wisdom, provision, direction, peace, and rest.
- Don’t do anything to make yourself appear better than you are, and don’t let people get away with building you up inappropriately.
- Memorize Isaiah 66:2; John 3:30; James 4:6; and Rev. 3:17–18.
- Read 2 Chronicles yearly.
- Give it all back to Him every day—your success, wealth, home, family, ministry—everything.
- Receive compliments, but then pass them on to the Lord.
- Worship daily. As Phillips Brooks said, “The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is.”
- Ask God daily to humble you. Give Him invitation and room to break you daily, even hourly, so that He need not break you in greater, more painful ways.

I have been. And God is answering.

Whose name matters most?

When those three invitations came a few years back, I struggled. Why would God put all three of these opportunities before me, when He knew I could accept only one, or possibly none? Did He know what He was doing? But then, did I? I was forced to admit the pride of my motives. Then, I placed the decision before the Lord and told Him I was willing to do whatever He wanted. That was when I sensed His reply: “Say no to all three, and then I’ll tell you why.” One by one, and with no great enthusiasm, I made the calls. After I had closed all the doors, the Lord whispered to my heart, “I am the Lord of your ministry and of all creation. If I want to put these invitations before you, only to direct someone else to do them, that is Mine to do. David, you be concerned with My name . . . and I’ll be concerned with yours.”

I wouldn’t trade that lesson for anything. Help me to remember, Lord. Help me to remember.

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Pride’s Breeding Ground*



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DAVID W. HENDERSON is pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, Indiana, and author of *Culture Shift*, an August 1998 release from Baker Book House.

David says, “I write this article as one who has barely begun to understand, let alone master—the problem of pride. But I don’t believe there is any issue closer to the center of that turbulent intersection where God’s perfect intentions and our fallen hearts collide. So I really write this for myself, but with the hope that others may benefit as they listen in.”