

Do not be proud

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church,
20th January 2019

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you (Romans 12:3).

Introduction

We return this morning to Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12, in which the apostle Paul works out the practical implications of the Gospel. During the last few weeks we were considering verses 1 and 2. In these verses the apostle urges his readers, in view of all that God had done for them, to offer their bodies to God as a living sacrifice. They are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world, but rather they are to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. He promises that when they live transformed lives they will "prove" the will of God. We thought about this last time, and I suggested that the apostle meant that if we have renewed minds we will "prove" God's will in three senses:

1. We will "prove" God's will in the sense that we will know clearly what his will is.
2. We will "prove" God's will in the sense that we will be a living demonstration of what the will of God lived in practice looks like.
3. We will "prove" in practice that God's will is "good, pleasing and acceptable".

Having laid out the overall principles in verses 1 and 2, the apostle then goes on to say, over the course of the next four chapters, how these principles are to work out in our lives, in various different areas.

The first thing that the apostle deals with is the use of spiritual gifts in the church, in verses 3 to 8. It is surely most remarkable that the very first thing that the apostle talks about when he is talking about the

practical implications of the Christian Gospel is our corporate life together as the people of God. God wants holiness of life. But that holiness of life is to be lived out in relationship with brothers and sisters in his family. When we are saved we become children of God. That means that we are brothers and sisters with the rest of the Lord's people. How we live out that corporate life is vitally important.

We shall need to spend at least a couple of weeks on verses 3 to 8. Today our attention is going to be on the first verse of the section, where the apostle urges his readers to be humble in their view of themselves and their gifting. In other words, he warns against the sin of pride.

Pride lies at the root of all sin. It is pride which led to the condemnation of the devil. It is pride which led Adam into sin, as he fell into the temptation to try to make himself like God. It is pride that lies at the root of men's continuing unbelief and rebellion against God. It is pride which leads men to refuse to believe the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is pride which destroys relationships, leading to quarrels, and moving those who have quarrelled to refuse to be reconciled to each other. So we need to listen carefully to what God has to say to us through this verse.

This verse breaks down naturally into the following headings:

1. Paul's own example of humility
2. How we should *not* think of ourselves
3. How we *should* think of ourselves

Let us consider these points together.

1. Paul's example of humility

Paul says at the beginning of this verse, "By the grace given me I say to each one of you..."

See how Paul both reasserts his authority and at the same time expresses deep humility in this phrase.

He re-asserts his authority as an apostle by saying "I say to each one of you". He first stated this authority at the beginning of the letter, where he introduced himself as "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Romans 1.1). Now he

reminds them of the authority that he has as an apostle. Because he is Christ's appointed apostle, who speaks the very Word of God to God's people, he can "lay down the law" to other believers. He can say "I say to you" with the same authority that Christ said "But I tell you..." (Matthew 5:22 and 28). And he imposes this authority upon all other believers, without exception. "I say to each one of you." All believers, from the most important to the least important, must heed what the apostle says.

Yet he combines this re-assertion of his authority with astonishing humility. He speaks "by the grace given me." What is grace? It is God's totally undeserved love. Paul never forgot what a sinner he had been, and how he was saved from eternal condemnation only through God's completely undeserved love. This is how he puts it in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verses 13 – 16:

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

Paul attributed his salvation entirely and completely to the undeserved love of God to him. And not only did he attribute his salvation to the grace of God, he also attributed his ministry as an apostle to God's undeserved love. As he says in Ephesians chapter 3 verses 7 and 8, "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Paul did not "lord it over" other believers. He did not see himself as being superior or worthy of "reverence". He was a brother with the other believers. His authority was not due to any merit or virtue of his own, but purely due to the undeserved grace God had given him to be an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. How different the apostle is from some who call themselves the successors of the apostles. The Roman Catholic religion has its Pope who sits on this throne in the Vatican, and has people come and bow before him and call him "Holy Father". Under him are the various cardinals, bishops and priests, who wear special

clothes and who are called “Your Excellency” , or “My Lord Bishop”. But there are those who call themselves evangelical who do something not that dissimilar. I have heard of pastors who sit on their thrones in churches, and people come up and kneel before them to get God’s blessing. This should never be! Jesus said,

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10. 42 – 45)

So we see that Paul was not guilty of “do what I say but do not do what I do”. He embodied in his own life the humility that he called his readers to exercise.

2. How we should not think of ourselves

Secondly, we see from this verse how we should *not* think of ourselves. Paul says, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.” We sometimes use the word “hyper” when we want to describe someone who is “over the top” in the way he is speaking. Our word “hyper” is the English version of the Greek word that Paul uses here. He is saying we should not think “hyper” thoughts of ourselves. This is what pride is, having an over-inflated view of our own worth and importance. Being big-headed, or puffed up, like a balloon.

What is wrong with pride? Pride is self-worship. It is turning yourself into an idol and worshipping yourself. It is making yourself the centre of the universe. Our world sees nothing wrong with it. It actually encourages pride. “Believe in yourself” the experts tell us. “Stand up for your rights.” “Don’t let yourself be treated like a doormat.” “Have a higher level of self-esteem.” But in God’s estimation human pride is an abomination, because it steals from God the honour which is due to him alone. The first commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20.3). When we are proud we put the god of self above the worship of Almighty God.

Therefore God is implacably opposed to pride. “He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble” (Proverbs 3.34), which is quoted twice in the New Testament in the form “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4.6 and 1 Peter 5.5).

Therefore it is a law built into the very fabric of the universe that pride leads to destruction. Our own English saying says “Pride goes before a fall”. This saying is based upon what the Bible says in Proverbs chapter 16 verse 18, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” Jesus warned repeatedly that “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:12, Luke 14:11, Luke 18:14).

In the Bible there are numerous cases of individuals and whole societies which were brought to ruin through pride. God says through the prophet Ezekiel that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because they were “were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me”. (Ezekiel 16:49 – 50). Nebuchadnezzar was judged with a period of insanity because of his pride. He boasted “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”, and immediately his sanity was taken away from him until he acknowledged that God was supreme over all the earth (Daniel 4:30 – 32). Haman was filled with hatred for the Jews because Mordecai, a Jew, would not bow down to him and his pride was offended. So he plotted to have all the Jews killed, and built a huge set of gallows upon which to hang Mordecai, but landed up being himself hung on these gallows. So we could go on. Nation after nation, individual after individual, all judged by God because of pride.

God hates pride so much that the entire method of salvation was devised so that there could be no trace of boasting on the part of any human being for gaining a place in heaven, even though this meant providing salvation at the immense cost of the life of his only begotten Son. God saves people by grace alone, by faith in Christ alone, so that “no one may boast before him.” (1 Corinthians 1:29)

Pride is a very subtle and devious sin, which creeps up on us without our being aware of it. So how can we detect pride in us? Here are some tell tale signs of pride:

- Mocking. Mockers are proud people who in their pride think that they can look down on God and laugh at him and his Word, and look down on their fellow men and pour scorn upon them.
- Boasting about one’s own achievements. If you are a proud person then your tongue will betray you. You will not be able to keep quiet about what you consider to be your abilities and your achievements.

- Conspicuous self-denigration. Strangely, talking yourself down can also be another form of pride. We say, “Oh, I am no good at all. I have no gifts. I cannot achieve anything.” This is merely inverted pride.
- Belittling the achievements of others. If you are proud it will also lead you to belittle what others are doing, and to find fault with them. You try to make yourself feel good by putting others down and pointing out their failings.
- Being judgemental and critical of others. If you are proud, you will be smugly self-confident of your own goodness, and will look down on others in what you consider to be their moral inferiority compared with you.
- Trying to take positions of power and honour.
- Treating others as unimportant. A proud person will be rude, unpleasant, aggressive, bullying, domineering and inconsiderate.
- Stubbornness. A proud person will not give way, even when he is shown from Scripture and from reason that his position is untenable. Why? Because he does not want to “lose face” before others.
- Refusing to listen to advice. A proud person resents being offered advice and gets angry when such advice is given, and carries on in his own way, often to his own ruin.
- Over-sensitivity to criticism. A proud person takes offence easily if he is insulted or criticised? Why? Because he loves his own honour with a passionate jealousy. Anyone who hurts his honour has, to him, committed the gravest possible sin, and is to be treated as an enemy.
- Refusal to apologise. A proud person will never apologise, even when it is pointed out to him from the Scripture that he has sinned.
- Refusal to receive an apology from others. A proud person will not be reconciled to another who has hurt him, even if the person who has done wrong makes an apology.
- Self-pity. What lies at the root of self-pity? Pride. Self-pity says, “I am more important than this. I deserve a better deal.

Do you have pride lurking in your mind? God is saying through his apostle, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.”

3. How we should think of ourselves

We come now to the third part of this verse, where Paul says how we are to think of ourselves instead. He says to his readers that they should not think of themselves more highly than they ought, “but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”

We are to have a sober judgement of ourselves. Rather than being like the drunkard who is full of crazy and unrealistic views of his own abilities and importance, we should be sober, down to earth, and realistic in our view of ourselves.

What does this involve? It involves remembering, first of all, how helpless and hopeless we are, in and of ourselves. Think of how you are in terms of your physical life and health. You are utterly dependent on others. Your very existence you owe to your parents. You are utterly dependent every day on others to provide you with water, electricity, heat, food, shelter, clothing. Just imagine what would happen if all the companies were to go out of business and all the shops were to shut. How long would you survive? Ultimately, of course, we owe our existence to God. Every breath that we take is only possible because of his grace. Should he withdraw his sustaining power we would immediately cease to exist.

Then think of how you are, in and of yourself, spiritually and morally. If you were to get what you deserve from God, what would you get? The answer the Bible gives is this: Hell. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3.23) and “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6.23).

Then, if you have been saved by Christ, think, why were you saved? Was it because of your good deeds or merit in any way? Not at all! “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast” (Ephesians 2.8 – 9).

Then, if you have any spiritual gifts, or if you are used by God to be a blessing to others in any way, or if you have made any progress towards becoming like Christ, why is this? Is it because you are somehow intrinsically virtuous? Not at all! It is only because God has given you what you do not deserve. “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Corinthians 4.7).

This is the point that Paul is making when he says that we are to think “in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” He is going to go on to speak about spiritual gifts in the church. We are to be realistic about whatever gifts we may have. We should neither denigrate the gifts we have, nor over-inflate them. But above all, we should realise that whatever gifts we have are “in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” The word for “given” is the word which is used to describe when an inheritance is divided among heirs. God has divided his gifts among his people. We should understand what our “inheritance” of gifting is, but we should also realise that, whatever our gifting, it is only by God’s grace, not according to any merit or worth of our own.

Conclusion

What is God telling us through these verses? We need to guard very carefully against the deadly sin of pride. It is absolutely ruinous to our relationship with him, and to our relationships with each other.

Let me ask you this question: Have you ever trusted in Christ as your Saviour? Could it be that your pride has stopped you from accepting God’s testimony about yourself as a sinner who is totally incapable of saving himself or herself? Could it be that your pride stops you from stooping to receive from God’s hand the free gift of eternal life that is in Christ? Are you going to refuse God’s salvation simply because you are too proud to accept it? Don’t be so foolish! Repent of your silly petty-minded pride. Humble yourself. Admit what you know is true anyway, that you are a terrible sinner. Look to Christ to save you from everlasting punishment.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=120191116478036>

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