

Sermon 13: 1 Corinthians 4:6-13: Pride and Humility

OUTLINE

Corinthian pride
Apostolic humility

INTRODUCTION

God hates pride. Proverbs 6:16-17, 'There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood.' 8:13, 'The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.' 16:5, 'Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord; be assured, he will not go unpunished.' What is pride? Dictionary.com gives us a definition, 'a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct, etc.'¹ We can be proud on a horizontal axis where we think ourselves better than others; or on a vertical access where we think ourselves independent of God. God hates pride because it is a violation of the two great commands to love God and neighbour.

Pride has been called The Mother of All Sin. All the evil acts that we have ever done have begun with an act of pride, every harm we have ever caused began first with the sin of pride. Augustine put it this way, "Pride is the beginning of sin. And what is pride but the craving for undue exaltation? And this is undue exaltation - when the soul abandons Him to whom it ought to cleave as its end, and becomes a kind of end to itself." Pride is said to be a wrong estimate of ourselves, and this is true. Pride is to forget He is God and you are not. When we take decide what truth is, what the law we will live by is, what is and is not a sin, we put ourselves in the place of God, forgetting that He is God and not us. And this is the root of all of our sinning. Proverbs 16:18-19, 'Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.' Every fall is preceded by pride. 18:12, 'Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor.'

In the Corinthian church there is destruction. The Corinthian church is full of divisions, these divisions are the result of pride. Pride has gone before their destruction and the Corinthian church full of themselves have mistreated each other in all sorts of ways. We see evidence of their pride in who they follow; their pride in seeking to be seen as wise in the eyes of the world preferring other teachings to the gospel; their pride in the rich abusing the poor at the Lord's table; their pride in what gifts they have and as a result promoting themselves in the worship service; they are proud of their good theology about eating meat offered to idols and as a result have caused their brethren to stumble. Having been given many gifts, these advantages have gone to their heads and Paul now brings them down a notch in 4:6-13. Our portion falls into two clear sections, in v6-8 Paul exposes the Corinthians pride; then as a contrast to this he paints a picture of apostolic humility in v9-13. The Corinthians have the wrong idea about themselves and what it means to be a Christian, Paul is now going to set them straight.

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/pride>, accessed 11/11/2022

Corinthian pride

V6, 'I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.' Paul here explains the point he is trying to make. He has been using all sorts of metaphors about ministry and ministers, talking about the church as a field and ministers as farmhands, the church as a building and ministers as builders, all to drive home the point that God is the one who gives life and the increase, ministers only do what God has appointed them to do, it is about God not man, let no man boast in His presence. Addressing the matter of divisions Paul has used the names of Paul and Apollos, this has led some to think that there were literally groups that favoured Paul over Apollos, but here we see Paul was only using them as token leaders. This is a point of gentleness on Paul's part, instead of embarrassing the leaders who may or may not be encouraging these divisions, Paul chooses to not name and shame them. This may be a point of tact on Paul's part as he seeks to see the church move forward united and strong. The addition of the word 'brothers' shows that Paul is speaking with concern and affection and not stridently taking out his anger on the Corinthians.

Paul summarizes his point this way, 'that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written.' Paul does not indicate what is written, but it does help us see his mode of operation. Paul recognizes that there is a rule that must guide the lives of believers, it is God's word, and we are not to go beyond what is written. It is likely that Paul is referring to the several texts from which he has been drawing his points so far, like 1:19, 'For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."' And 1:30, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' After quoting more of the OT in 3:19-20, Paul draws the same conclusion in 3:21, 'so let no one boast in men.' The clear teaching of scripture is that God is the only one who is to be lifted up, to be looked to for salvation, to be seen as the source of truth and wise. And that man is not to be exalted, if anything on account of our sin we need to be humbled; man cannot be your savior for he himself needs salvation; man is not the fount of truth and wise but God alone.

Paul drives this home to the lesson they need, 'that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.' This word 'puffed up' is often translated as arrogant. It literally means inflated, which suits a definition of pride well, which is an inflated opinion of oneself. Inside there is no substance, nothing but hot air. This word occurs again in 4:18, 19, 5:2. Paul directly links their pride with their sin against each other. Instead of the gospel causing them to have an equal love and regard for all their brethren, their pride leads them to favour the one who is like them, the one that agrees with their worldly ideas of beautiful, important, successful, the one who agrees with their opinion about what is wise and true and politically expedient. In our pride we divide the human race into those who get our stamp of approval, and who we advance and defend and praise; and the other part that gets our scorn, our insults, our ill treatment, or who we just don't think worthy of our time and consideration.

V7, 'For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?' Paul ever the teacher asks some provocative questions to help them see the folly of their pride. A who, what and why question to cause them to reflect on the true nature of things, not the self-deceiving lens of their own pride. First

question, 'For who see anything different in you?' This question can be taken positively or negatively, positively it means 'don't you see that God is the one who makes one person differ from another?' Or something more negative and like, 'Who do you think you are?' Or, 'what makes you so special?' The point of the first question is the same as the second and the third, 'What do you have that you did not receive?' Here Paul reminds them that God is the source of all our good not ourselves, and so he goes on, 'If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?' This is the great leveler of all pride, there is one God and it is not you. Paul has been pounding this point home relentlessly. Just go back to chapter 1, even there from the opening Paul talks about how he thanks God for the grace they have received, v4. How God has enriched them; God has confirmed the word about Christ not their own wisdom among them; how God has given them spiritual gifts; how God will sustain them until the end and find them guiltless on the last day, and how God is faithful to His promises, v4-9. 1:28-31, 'God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." The apostle came with the testimony of God which worked by the power of God as the Spirit of God opened blind eyes to see, 2:1-14. God appoints ministers, God's message is the seed; the church belongs to God, and God gives the increase to the efforts of his servants. What do we have that we have not received, all is of grace, James 1:17, 'Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.' John 3:27, 'John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.'

What an important lesson this is for us. God is the one who saves us not we ourselves; God is the one who gives us our gifts that differ from one another's; God is the one who has guided our paths by His providence, giving us our families, culture, education, opportunities, and blessings. God has also been the one who has caused whatever apparent disadvantages we have had, George Whitfield's squint and Moses stutter, were all by God's appointment, and He has His good purposes in them all. The lesson for us is that we cannot look at what we have and think ourselves better than another. We cannot even look at our so called disadvantages and say that God does not have a purpose in them. Humility and contentment are the by-products of Paul's biblical way of thinking. If you are not humble or not content, here is what we need to be thinking about, God is the source of all that we have. When you find yourself coveting what belongs to another stop and remember that your Father knows what you need, that in His wisdom He has chosen your present portion, that He has a good purpose that involves your sanctification in this, you have not been overlooked in the distribution of His good gifts. We should be pondering what we have received and how we can be faithful with what we have been given, not in mourning how we wish what somebody else had.

Anytime I think on the lessons of humility I cannot help but be reminded that the proud do not beg, or put another way the proud do not pray. The poor man begs, and prayer is a mark of humility. Even the great apostle Paul with all of his gifting, prays for the churches. He labours like a mother giving birth recognizing that he does not have the power to change hearts and protect the flock from false teachers. He is cast upon God who alone has the power to save souls. When the Galatian church was being worried by false teachers his sense of

helplessness turned into prayer, Gal. 4:19, 'my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!' we have all been brought to the end of ourselves as we have seen sin in our loved ones, as we see the blindness and the hardness of heart that sends them towards the precipice. We feel our deep inability and poverty and our need for God to act and so we pray. Prayer is how we channel true humility not a destructive self-loathing.

V8, 'Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!' From searching questions to accusing sarcasm. The proud person is the self-sufficient person and does not need to be given anything that they think they already have or can get for themselves. The Corinthians don't want the apostles or what they have to offer, because through the worldly wisdom they are following, through the human teachers they have taken for themselves, through the knowledge and the gifting they have, they are filled, rich and royalty. They need for nothing. Instead of feeling their need and being hungry and thirsty for righteousness, instead of looking outside themselves for more grace, they are filled, satiated. Instead of recognizing our natural impoverishment, that we are flesh and nothing without God, they think they are rich. Instead of seeing that they are criminals, orphans and slaves they view themselves as kings, as royalty, as ruling. We cannot help but be reminded of the words of Christ to the Laodicean church, Rev. 3:17-18, 'For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.' Things are not as they appear. Theological precision can be a cover for a conceited pedanticness and an unteachable spirit. Walking in gospel liberty can be a ruse to hide a heart that is making excuses for its sins. A bustling activity in all sorts of church activity can hide a self-righteous self-dependence that sees themselves as the one everyone else needs or the church will sink. A zealous pursuit of miraculous gifts can be cover a desire to be in the limelight and bask in the glory that is due to God alone. Paul could see through all of this to the pride of the Corinthians.

The Corinthians prided themselves in their wisdom, but Paul knows the difference between worldly wisdom and the wisdom from above, James 3:13-18, 'Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.'

Apostolic humility

How do you correct someone who has already written you off because they are enough on their own? Paul decides to contrast the Corinthian's pride with apostolic humility. The Corinthians have a worldly notion of wisdom, success, what a message that saves should sound like, what a teacher of truth should look and sound like, they bring all sorts of false assumptions that have shaped

their behavior that has divided the church. So Paul using the apostles as examples once again demonstrates the normal Christian life. V9, 'For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.' The Corinthians seem to be taken in by appearances, to desire respectability in the eyes of the world, and follow men who fit those criteria. Paul in contrast talks about the apostles. Many of things that Paul is going to say here are going to be relevant for us as Christians as well. Like the Corinthians we too worry about what others think and fall prey to worldly notions of success and respectability. Paul begins by stressing that the hatred the apostles receive is God's doing, God has put them on display. The picture here would be a familiar one. When a victorious general returned from war he would have a train with P.O.W.s. They would be paraded through the streets of Rome where they would have rotten food and worse thrown at them, there would be jeering and public shaming; finally the prisoners would be taken to the Colosseum where they would have to fight wild beasts as entertainment. The apostles in particular and all Christians in some degree share in the shame that fell upon Christ. The world will hate us as it hated Him. The devil is against us and stirring the world up against the church, unbelievers hate the truth and seek to silence it, the church in every age has been rejected. This is what makes the Corinthian pandering for worldly approval so foolish.

V10, 'We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.' According to the standards of the Corinthians, the apostles are fools, but they are wise; the apostles are weak but they are strong; the apostles are disreputable, but they are honourable. Paul has already spoken about the gospel being the foolishness of God and the weakness of God to save. Paul will talk about though he is weak this is an opportunity for God to show His strength and be exalted. The word for disrepute is also used to speak of someone who has their citizenship revoked, of people who are stateless and are deemed outsiders, a persona non grata. Each of these things has to do with how the world views us. Will we hold fast to the truth of God's word even though we are accused to committing intellectual suicide? Like the Corinthians do we care so much about the world thinking well of us that they can intimidate us out of holding fast to our biblical convictions? Will we budge on the truth that Jesus is necessary for salvation and no other religion can save? Will we budge on God's definition of marriage? Will we change the definition of sin to suit what the majority says it is?

Paul now lists the various forms of difficulty and persecution that the apostles face for being God's servants, 'To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.' If the Corinthians think true spirituality is winning a popularity contest then being an apostle would be their worst nightmare come true. The service of God involves sacrifices where even some basic necessities like food and drink and good clothing and a permanent home can be hard to come by, but we go on serving God not for the benefits we gain but because we are in the truth and serving the God of the universe in a war to win souls. We put up with hardships in service because of what is at stake. We have to put up with buffeting, this is the word used to describe the whack around the ears that a slave would receive from their masters if they were not quick enough, the shameful abuse that you would treat a nobody with is what the apostles put up

with. The cross shaped Christ like life is not a life of the prosperity preacher where we live in luxury where everyone serves us. It is life of menial labor, in order to have the privilege of bringing the word to unreached areas, or to avoid looking like a wandering teacher who leached people's money, Paul and the apostles would work with their hands. Working with your hands was low work for the poor, the rich had servants and did not get their hands dirty.

And instead of being loved, we are hated, but instead of fighting back we respond as Christ did, 'When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat.' Because love informs all our actions we do not get revenge upon those who revile us, we do not find clever insults that expose them for what they are, we bless, we pray, we seek their highest spiritual good. When persecuted instead of being put off, we endure. When slandered and people tell unjust lies about us just because we are Christians, we do not rage we entreat. It must be noted that in Greek culture to not stand up for yourself, to not punch back or give a hard word back was seen as a mark of cowardice, but Paul says that the life of the cross is willing to risk being seen this way as we seek to bring the words of life to all men, being the servant of all that all may be saved.

The only way we are able to walk this most difficult path is because Jesus walked it first giving us an example of how to walk, and warning us that this is what it means to pick up a cross and follow Him. Phil. 2:5-8, 'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.' 1 Pet. 2:19-23, 'For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.' How different this is to our age of political outrage.

Paul's lessons here are simple we are to be humble and we are to endure suffering. We must not seek what the world thinks is wise or acceptable, we should expect to be rejected by the world we suffer to serve. This is the way Christ walked, this is the way the apostles walked this is the way the Corinthians are called to walk and us as well.

'Amy Carmichael (1867-1951) was a wonderful and faithful missionary to India. She built an orphanage and rescued little girls from lives of Hindu temple prostitution. She never took a furlough from this work, though she suffered from neuralgia, a disease of the nerves, that greatly weakened her body. Carmichael was severely injured from a fall in 1931 and was basically bedridden for the last twenty years of her life. Still, she pressed on, endured in missions ministry for her Master, and went to be with her Savior at the age of 83. How did she think of life for the servant of Christ? I think we should let her speak for herself. Echoes of 1 Corinthians 4:8-13 can be heard ringing in the background!

Do not be surprised if there is an attack on your work, on you who are called to do it, on your innermost nature—the hidden person of the heart. The great thing

is not to be surprised, nor to count it strange—for that plays into the hand of the enemy. Is it possible that anyone should set himself to exalt our beloved Lord and not instantly become a target for many arrows? (*Candles in the Dark*, 42)²

² Daniel L. Akin, [“Just Who Do You Think You Are? \(1 Corinthians 4:6-13\).”](#) in *Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2023), 91–92.