

Sermon 45: 1 Corinthians 13:4-5: The Humility of Love

OUTLINE

How pride sees itself
How pride treats others

INTRODUCTION

Pride is a wrecking ball. Proverbs 16:18 has proven true over and over again, 'Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.' Pride destroys things. Pride not only has a self-destruct feature built into it by God as sin is given itself as its own reward/judgement; but pride is also terribly destructive in the lives of others as well. That word 'destruction' is not describing mild effects but substantial damage. Paul has identified various sins that the Corinthians are committing which are tearing their church apart. Pride is one of the sins driving these problems in the Corinthian church. He is now tackling those sins in this section not with a number of commandments but rather by highlighting the nature of love which fulfills the law.

Paul has dealt with their impatience and harshness showing how love like God's in His dealings with us is patient and kind; he has addressed their envy and bragging showing that love fulfills the law by seeking and delighting in another's good. Paul now targets their pride stressing that love is not arrogant or rude. Like the other pairs that Paul puts forward there does seem to be a logical relationship. 'Arrogance' seems to deal with how the proud see themselves compared to others; and 'rude' seems to focus on the bad behavior that goes out to those who the proud despise. So in our investigation of Paul's exhortations to love we have two points, how pride sees itself; and how pride treats others. We want to take note of the destructive power of pride and how love is a humble servant of others.

How pride sees itself

'it is not arrogant.' Once again Paul casts love in the limelight by contrasting it with pride. This word for 'pride' in the Greek only occurs 7 times in the NT, and 6 of the 7 times it is used by Paul in 1 Corinthians. So if we want to know what it means, and what Paul has in his sights, we merely have to look at the verses where he mentions it. 4:6, '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.' V18-19, 'Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.' 5:1-2, 'It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.' 8:1, 'Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.' 1 Cor. 13:4 is the 6th. The 7th being Col. 2:18. You will have noticed that 'puffed up' was sometimes used to translate this word, the word literally means to 'inflate' like a puffer fish that makes itself look bigger than it is. At least four types of sins are associated with this arrogance. There was the pride associated with their divisions, how they prided themselves on whose group they belonged to and who the leader of their

group was, who had the best preacher, the most acclaim, who appeared the most wise, successful and distinguished. Then there was the arrogance of those who spoke against Paul and the apostles who thought themselves better than the apostles and spoke against them while they were absent. They were also full of themselves in their cultural superiority; their intellectual superiority; their spiritual superiority as they had knowledge and miraculous gifts in their midst which led to be blind to their faults in tolerating sexual immorality and not doing church discipline; in some running rough shod over others in eating meat offered to idols and being a stumbling block; and in the way they were putting themselves forward because they could speak in tongues. Pride is destructive and it is tearing this Corinthian church apart as they push divisions, tolerate sin, run over instead of serve the weak and disrupt the very worship of God to put themselves forward.

Let's think about pride a bit before we think about the humble love that opposes it. What is pride? As someone has said, 'the essence of sin is pride, and pride is the inordinate assertion of oneself.' Pride has a vertical and horizontal dimension as we are proud against God and man. All pride is built upon a lie and self-deception because it forgets or refuses to accept the truth of what we are before God and others. We lie to ourselves about what we are, telling ourselves that we are good when we are bad, strong when we are weak, competent when we are not. We lie to ourselves about what we have thinking that our gifts are sourced from us, our accomplishments are solely dependent upon our strength, and that things are actually ours forever. In our pride we not only lie to ourselves but about others as well. We cannot allow others to be recognized, to be good at anything, to receive praise so we must lie about others accomplishments, others goodness, others importance. Pride often has to raise itself up at the cost of pushing others down.

There are three traditional categories for areas of pride and the Corinthians were committing sins in all three. Firstly, we are proud in the gifts that we have been given through nature. This is the most common form of pride found on the playground. We feel self-important because we have been gifted by God in some natural endowment. People of high intelligence will be proud of their own abilities and value their opinions above others and so mistreat those who disagree with them. You know you have this form of pride if it rankles you that someone would dare to criticize your opinion on anything and you defend your opinions to the shedding of blood as it were. People who are endowed with good looks can feel self-important as they compare their natural attributes to others and despise others who are not well-endowed. If we have good athletic ability, this is a gift of God that we could take for granted and feel ourselves and others who are gifted in this way as being superior. The Corinthians credited themselves with being wise. The cure for pride over natural gifts is to remember with John the Baptist, that we have nothing except that which has been given us from above. That every good and perfect gift comes to us from above. That it is God who has knit us together in the way that we are for the purposes that He has for us. Thanksgiving is a cure, doing all things for God's glory is a cure.

Secondly, there is the pride that comes from God's gift of our opportunities. God orders our steps and He gives us gifts in us being born into a stable and healthy family; into a nation that has had the benefit of Christianity being salt and light; perhaps we have been placed in a wealthy family, or into a position where opportunities not available to others abound. Maybe you have received a windfall in who you have married, the education you received or the job you

were able to get. We can all get a sense of false self-importance by these external advantages thinking that they somehow make us better than others who do not have them. The Corinthians who were Roman citizens or who were rich would mistreat those who were Jewish, or slaves, or poor. We overcome this pride by remembering who orders our steps, whose wisdom has chosen our portion for us. This likewise helps us submit to difficulties if the Lord has chosen a difficult portion for us.

Thirdly, there is the pride that comes from God's spiritual gifts. God changes our hearts and equips us for service and a tremendous growth can take place as a life turns from light to dark, from being profitless and destructive to being good and beneficial. Hidden talents can surface and develop; old patterns of behavior and bad character traits can be overcome; blessings can be poured out so that many are blessed by these gifts be they teaching or serving gifts. And like all the other gifts of God we can take the credit, we can take the opportunity to affirm ourselves and not God, parade these things as if we were the source, putting them forward so that we can get an advantage over others by them. The Corinthians were proud of their theological insights, and their miraculous gifts.

But the central thing we really want to understand is why love is not arrogant. Why is love automatically humble and not arrogant? We must remember that Paul is describing love as the work of grace in the heart, the fruit of the Spirit's work in regeneration and sanctification. This humility that is driven by love is not possible apart from the work of the gospel. You see in the gospel we who were Godless, who were alienated from God, who were living by lies and deceptions have had our eyes opened. All true humility begins with a true knowledge of God and ourselves before Him. Some would say they have humility because they are truthful when they compare themselves to others and can confess that someone is better than them at something. Others would say they are able to have humility because they look inside and can be honest about what they see inside them. True humility like wisdom and knowledge only truly begins with a fear of the Lord, to know God as He has revealed Himself and the fitting response to those facts, that is true humility.

The Bible teaches us that we are to be humble on two fronts, there is the humility of being creatures and the humility of being sinners. The angels are humble though they are not sinful. They are given in worship and service, and feel unworthy to praise God though they have no sin. Adam in the Garden would have had a natural humility before the fall as he recognized that everything that we have, even our very existence is by His power and will not ours. There is a proper humility fitting to all creatures, simply by virtue of being creatures. As Paul says in Romans 1, even with only a knowledge of God as our Creator there should be a recognition of this fact and a giving of thanks. As sinners we deny even this basic fact that there is a God who made us and all things, and we do not thank Him. This fact alone is sufficient to inspire the angels to perpetual praise and obedience. The devil's rejection of this fact alone was sufficient to commit the unforgivable sin and he is now beyond redemption. To know this much should be enough to cast us on our faces before Him. But the Bible reveals more, not only are we creatures who owe our allegiance and hearts to God who is worthy because He created all things; we are sinners who daily deny Him His right as God over us and ours. But we always underestimate how bad we are as sinners. We are sinners by race, by genetics, by action, by word, our very hearts constantly give rise to things we do not want. The number of our sins is immeasurable, the payment to satisfy our legal debt infinite and beyond any

means we can come up with; and we have no power to put a stop to the sin that arises within us endlessly. True humility is the helpless self-abasement that comes to an end of itself and casts itself before God for salvation, salvation from our sins, ourselves, and our enemies. And I say self-abasement not merely abasement. On judgement day every knee will bow but not every heart will be full of humility. Every sinner will be humbled, but only those who believe will be bowing the knee willingly, joyfully, confidently. On that day all of us will be humbled but not all will be humble. The devil knows the power of God and rejects it, true humility is seeing the truth of ourselves as creatures and sinners and abasing ourselves before Him.

But how are love and humility linked? This sight of God and ourselves is the foundation for us receiving the grace of God in the gospel. Like Isaiah we cry out woe is me I am undone, but then a coal from the altar upon which atoning blood has been spilled is applied to my lips and I am cleansed. The unthinkable happens. Imagine being Isaiah for a moment, go through that emotional ordeal of seeing God in His glory, hear the angels in their fervent praise and ardent love, know your own unworthiness to the very bottom of your soul, and then feel the relief as an angels touches you and cleanses you. Can you imagine the relief, the gratitude, the absolute loyalty, his heart would be thoroughly melted in fiery love. But then imagine the scene where the very one sitting on the throne stands up, and though having the right to grasp equality with God becomes a baby, born in humble circumstances, whose glory is veiled, and the very creation that is being sustained by Him ignores Him. And the very people He has created and has come to save see and hear Him and they do not love Him, they do not listen to Him, no instead they murder Him. And while they are murdering Him He is praying that they would be forgiven. And His death and resurrection accomplish a salvation that is free for the guilty, freely accepted by grace, free because the price that was necessary to pay for the full forgiveness of sins was paid by Him. And not only are our sins forgiven, but the devil is defeated, death is overcome and a new creation our guaranteed future as we gain more in Christ than Adam ever had. Isaiah's poor heart would not be able to contain itself. This is the most beautiful sight that we could ever behold. Before such love, such service, such generosity, such grace, such willing suffering, we are all silence and all loudest praise; we are all submission; all willingness; all resignation. Why does humility produce love? Because seeing such love, being served with such love, it rends the proud heart, it gives us a sight of the greatest beauty and a hunger to be like this most beautiful love. The love that flows from the gospel is a humble love.

Having tasted the grace of God in the gospel we are humbled and desirous to love like we have been loved. The gospel produces this humble love. The gospel reinforces our sinfulness; our unworthiness; our insufficiency casting us upon God. The gospel teaches us to throw our crowns at His feet and cry out, not to us, not to us, but to your name give glory. It quietens our hearts from complaining and grumbling; it loosens our hold on the hurts others have committed against us; all ambition; all desire to brag; any accomplishments are as nothing before Him. The effect is not inflated and puffed up but deflated, not the raising up of ourselves, but the willing raising up of others. The beauty of the love that saves us compels us to be humble servants of others. You cannot love Christ without loving humility.

How pride treats others

'It is not arrogant, or rude.' This word for rude is a rare word which means to act indecently. Some have felt like it might have sexual overtones but it is more likely related to the arrogance that Paul has grouped it with. Others give the meaning as acting unbecomingly/disgracefully, or behaving gracelessly. If we are looking for examples of this in the Corinthian church the inappropriate behavior of the women casting off their traditional roles and dress in not adopting head coverings; the atrocious behavior of humiliating the poor and getting drunk at the Lord's Supper; and the spectacle of dominating the worship service with spectacular gifts would be obvious examples that we could put forward.

The connection between arrogance and rudeness is obvious. If you are full of yourself, and think yourself better than everyone else, you will go through life entitled and not giving the common courtesy you would give to your equals or your betters. Paul sees humble love as the answer to this native rudeness because humility sees no loss to itself in counting others more important than itself and therefore treats them with gentleness and respect. Proud leaders whether its bosses or husbands or parents will not treat those under them over whom they have responsibility with respect. They will not seek their opinion, their comfort, or make big decisions about their future in consultation with them. They will assume their importance, demand obedience, hand out rules and expect unquestioning cooperation. If there is not enough alacrity in their response they will berate; if their ideas are questioned they will insult; but those who are loving, who are themselves humbled by the love of Christ will see themselves as small, and treasure the opportunity to imitate Christ in a servant leadership role and be gentle and lowly like Christ.

But it is not only those in authority but those under authority whose attitude and actions towards others are renovated by humble love. Christians are those who give honour to whom honour is due. We do not carry around a resentment towards those in authority, be they policemen, teachers, politicians, church elders or parents. Some cultures have a tradition of egging their politicians Christians have a tradition of praying for and submitting to their governments.

Rudeness is rife in our internet age where we carry on anonymous communication under false names and can insult people without consequence. Anonymity carries over into the way we are happy to give up common decency while driving. Rudeness is enshrined in our culture through the consumeristic rule of the customer always being right making any disgruntled customer entitled to abuse those serving them. How different the Christian is to be. Saved by grace, transformed through serving love, the believer is always aware of this debt they can never repay. They glory in being low before God, they do not object to being servants who wash feet, praying for enemies, going the second mile, returning good for evil, honouring all. Christ's humility was not a case of making Himself richer at our expense, so that we became poorer. No, He who was rich became poor so that we might be lifted up and become rich. Pride cannot stand to be brought low and another raised up; love is willing to be brought low that another might be raised up. The path of humble love has been sanctified by Christ and every believer counts it a privilege to walk as He walked, and serve as He served. To be conformed to His likeness in any and every way is the least we can do and still we know it is not enough to do justice for what He has done for us.

Pride destroys, pride is inflated with its own importance and runs roughshod over others not considering them in anyway. But love, that love shown to us by Christ, who humbled Himself to serve the unworthy, in being loved by Him, we long to live and love like Him and have humility in the place of pride, lowliness in the place of being puffed up, and gentleness in our dealings with all in the place of rudeness.