



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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PRIDE

We are all familiar with Jesus' parable of the seats at the banquet, where the guests all vie for the best seats. Jesus counsels that this is foolishness, since one might be asked to take a lower seat. The guest would then be publicly humiliated as he goes to take the lowest seat. Thus it is only common sense to take the lowest seat, and allow our host to bid us come up higher when he sees our humility.

There is one problem, however. What if our host doesn't happen to notice where we are sitting? What if the vindication of our humility, "Come up higher, friend," never comes? We are left in the lowest seat, sitting next to a bore, not getting much food, and thoroughly regretting that we didn't try at least a little higher. It seems to us then that we have wasted the effort at humility. We return to our old habits of looking out for ourselves. We are confirmed in the view that if we don't, nobody else will. We decide that Jesus' advice doesn't work in the real world.

If we are to take Jesus' parable at face value, we must be ready to deal with getting stuck in the lowest seat. This is where the parable ceases to be simple, practical advice for use at dinner parties, and becomes a key to Christian living. It is not worldly advice. It is a description of how to live with God.

The problem which the parable addresses is pride. Pride is a serious and pervasive affliction of mankind (and angels as well, it would appear). It has many and various manifestations, but the root is always the same. Man wishes to live for himself alone. He wishes to regard himself as the center of the universe, and expects everyone and everything to revolve around him. In his pride, man assumes that he can do all that is necessary for himself. He doesn't really need anyone else. In fact, he doesn't want to be dependent upon anyone else, for that would demonstrate that he was not so powerful, not in control of his life.

Because the root of pride is so deep, it is (alas!) terribly common among Christians. We do not always recognize it for what it is, but it is around a lot. It may appear in the form of a need to put ourselves forward, lest we get lost in the crowd -- like the guest at the banquet. We are afraid that we will appear to be no better than the crowd. We do not like to think that we are really no more important than others. If we are afflicted with this form of pride, then we are satisfied with ourselves only when we are in prominent positions in parish life -- Vestry, coffee hour, serving at the altar.

Pride can also lead us to resent the menial tasks we have to do. We want to think of ourselves as important, and so we get a little angry at having to clean the house, do the dishes, mow the lawn, and do all those other mundane things which are necessary to family life. We think it beneath us to spend much time on them -- a little time now and then is all right, but if we find ourselves in a situation where they make up a large part of our day -- then we get upset. Our pride would have us believe that we should be doing something more important, when in fact, if God has given us something to do, what could be more important?

Or it can take the form of figuring that we are really good enough for heaven as we are, and accepting the sloth that results from such a judgment. We look around, and see the mass of people in the world who appear to be less religious and less virtuous than we are (on the whole), and conclude that we have done enough: God will let us into heaven. This pride makes the mistake of thinking that it is what we do that gets us into heaven: that we earn our way in by accumulating enough merits here on earth. Christians know that it doesn't work this way at all. Heaven is opened to us by Christ's self-offering upon the Cross: it is God's free gift to us, unmerited on our part. A lifetime of good deeds on our part cannot erase one little sin. Without Christ there is no atonement. We are utterly dependent upon Him for our salvation.

Some Christians are afflicted with the form of pride that makes them want to do good deeds for God. They act rather like they are trying to curry the favor of their first grade teacher. They go off on their own and do things that they think will make God proud of them. They do them apart from Him, and present Him with the results. There are two errors in this approach to religious life. First, it betrays a false idea of God. He is here thought of as one who can be bought off with a few trinkets of virtue. The true extent of His power and glory and love is unknown. Second, the person who sets out to do good deeds by himself sets himself apart from God. Rather than being bound to God in the doing of good, the very deeds come between the doer and God: we become proud of them and want God to be proud of us because of them. In truth, we are but His servants and stewards, incapable of pleasing Him by ourselves.

The worst form of pride is that of the Pharisee. Here is a person who has a strong sense of duty, of external righteousness, but does not

accept God's love for him. His external devotion is above reproach. He is in church every Sunday, active in parish life. He abhors sin and his moral life (as far as anyone can tell) is exemplary. Chances are he also does some special devotions on a regular basis, such as the daily office. And yet, in all of this, there is no real joy but rather judgment. There may be a smile -- Christians are supposed to be happy, after all -- but it is a smile of duty not of joy. He does not seem to reap the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, etc.), but is instead a rather hard and unforgiving person.

He really cannot help being unforgiving. For he does not know the reality of God's forgiveness in his own life. His religion is something he does for himself -- according to rules set by the Church, to be sure -- but his religion is do-it-yourself and not God-given. His salvation is in the virtue he has accomplished for himself, so he does not really (deep down) believe that he is in need of forgiveness. Thus he has not accepted it from God, and cannot therefore be expected to extend it to anyone else.

The determining characteristic of this affliction is the lack of Christian love. The Pharisee's religion is one of external action and not of the heart. He does what he does out of his sense of duty, that it is the right thing to do (which, we must admit, it usually is -- his virtue is real). But his concern is doing the thing, and not that doing it will draw him closer to God. He does his virtuous acts not because he loves God and wants to please Him, but because by being virtuous he doesn't need God in any personal way. A religion of virtue has no real need for God, since it does not require God's act of redemption. Man makes his own.

Most Christians, fortunately, are not so thoroughly under the sway of pride as this. More often, we see pride in such things as getting unduly upset when things go wrong. Then we are pretending to be God ourselves by acting as if we had control over all the world. There are many and various signs of pride but one root: preferring self to God.

So how do we go about dealing with this terrible problem? It is not easy. For pride is the temptation of the virtuous. The only solution is to abandon ourselves to God. Several things will help us to do this.

First of all, we need to learn to recognize pride for what it is. Pride often masquerades as virtue and righteousness (remember the Pharisees), so we need to learn to tell the one from the other. We need to identify the telltale signs of pride as it leads to self-assertion, anger, self-righteousness, judgmentalism, dissatisfaction with the jobs God has given us, a false idea of God. Once we have recognized our pride, we have a chance of dealing with it. So long as we (proudly) deny that pride has anything to do with us, we will not make much progress.

Second, we must trust God. If we are not promoted at the banquet, we must trust that nothing really important is lost. What does it matter after all, so long as we are loved by God? Only by the firm belief that God does take care of us will we be willing to leave ourselves in His hands. Only then will we be able to let go of our concern for ourselves in the sure and certain conviction that all is well. We may not get the worldly recognition we would like, but we know that we have all that is best for us.

To develop this conviction within ourselves, we need to practice reminding ourselves that God has always taken care of us in the past. Israel got into trouble when they forgot what God did for them in Egypt and in the desert and in giving them the Promised Land. When they forgot His past care for them, they feared that they would be overwhelmed by their present troubles: they sought not their help in Him but in their own strength. We, too, must remember that God has taken very good care of us, even when we were not looking for it. Then it will be a little easier to trust that He will care for us now.

Third, we must practice the reality of our redemption as God's gift to us. We must remind ourselves that we do not deserve the gift of Jesus' death nor the blessings that it brings us. Our pride can be stilled only when we know that we have done nothing to be proud of. Our whole worth is that which God has given us. This is a matter of learning to know ourselves as God knows us, not as we would like to think of ourselves.

We cannot overcome pride on our own: that's using pride to cure pride. Whatever we do to overcome pride will in turn make us proud of our accomplishment. It is only by grace that pride can be overcome. If we really wish to do battle with our pride, we will give ourselves over into God's hands. We will enlist in His legions, for only He is powerful enough to overcome it. We cannot.

Finally, we must abide in God's love. The ruling principle in Christian life, our greatest concern, must be to return God's love. We must conduct ourselves as faithful (if sometimes prodigal) sons of God -- for so we are, by adoption. Our virtuous deeds are done to please the Father, for we love Him and would not offend Him. As His children, we seek to do nothing apart from Him.

This requires a lot of practice. To learn to conform our wills to His is the goal of our prayer and devotional lives. We wish to abide in Him, and to have Him abide in us. For most of us this does not come easily. But it brings with it the greatest fruits of Christian life: the joy and peace of true life in Christ, a life free from the great and oppressive burdens of human pride.

