

STRUGGLES ON THE JESUS WAY

Pride

Philippians 2:1-11

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Pride. Perhaps the greatest struggle on the Jesus way is not out there, but in here. Pride. Have you noticed? When we focus so much on our own feelings, our own happiness, our own rights, we become so unhappy and so exhausted. As someone once said, selfish people are almost always miserable, and miserable people are almost always selfish? Richard Foster says submission is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always getting my own way.

Perhaps it would be helpful to take a moment and notice how our text is put together by Paul. Contrary to what you might think, it is NOT first of all a passage about Jesus Christ's death with a few little verses about pride thrown in as an introduction. It's the other way around. It's a sermon about selfishness, using Jesus' work on the Cross as an example. Here's the heart of the sermon: 1) Do nothing from selfishness--v. 3; 2) Regard others above yourself--v. 3; Look out for others' interests before your own--v. 4. Paul uses the word "conceit" in v. 3. It means a delusion, emptiness, a hollow opinion. Ann Landers once wrote, "Don't accept your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful." You recall that President Teddy Roosevelt had a very strong ego. He liked to be the center of attention. One of his children said, "He wants to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral."

Instead, says Paul, practice humility. That word in the Greek is a blend word, literally "low-mindedness," a word coined by Christians and introduced to the lexicon of the day. And by the way, here's the caution you may have been waiting for. Humility does not mean self-hatred. It means a refusal to let our pride or our own advantages govern our lives.

And as I said, the illustration of this humility is none other than Jesus. You've heard of upward mobility? Jesus practiced downward mobility (vv. 5-8). Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be clutched. William Barclay wrote that Jesus did three things on the Cross that we can model: 1) He did not dominate others but served them; 2) He did not seek his own way, but God's; 3) He did not seek his own glory but God's [*The Daily Study Bible Series, Philippians*, p. 38]. And so I ask myself: How do I rate on the Jesus scale?

So where does this teaching on pride and humility leave us? Well, to begin with, think about how pride blocks a relationship with God in the first place. To be in Christ, we must repent of our sins. Our will must be broken and we have to know deep down that we need Christ. Next, consider how pride hinders our relationships with others and creates conflict. Think about times in your own life when your pride has broken God-intended connections.

Consider how pride and selfishness adhere to social structures, to systems and institutions and becomes greed and injustice. One of my pastor friends recently testified in our legislature regarding the excesses of the payday loan industry, which currently harvests an average of over 400% interest from those who can least afford it. She was scolded by a legislator for wanting to improve the system. What other word is there for this kind of corporate pride, selfishness and greed? It's sin wearing a business suit. But it's still sin.

But pride can also hinder joyous, fruitful Christian service. Think of how pride can keep us consumed with our own rights, our own comforts, our own way. We want to serve Christ, but we want to do it on our terms. I've found myself thinking and praying, "Lord I don't want to be THAT kind of _____." Fill in the blank. I see myself or someone else acting ugly in Kingdom service and I think, "No, Lord, I don't want to ever be like that." I don't want to be that kind of husband, who has time for everyone else and not for my spouse. I don't want to be that kind of Christian--always whining about how hard I work, complaining that it isn't convenient. I don't want to be that kind of church--the kind that writes cruel, anonymous notes, the kind that gossips, the kind that is consumed with its own comforts and is addicted to programs versus an outward focus.

When we are clinging to our own rights and privileges, our hands aren't free to serve others. Let's see. What did Paul say? 1) Do nothing from selfishness--v. 3; 2) Regard others above yourself--v. 3; Look out for others' interests before your own--v. 4. The New English Bible has a great phrasing of v. 5: "Let your bearing toward each other arise out of your life in Christ."

Someone has wisely pointed out that a healthy follower of Jesus is like a head of wheat. The more ripe it becomes, the lower its head bends. Fruitful Christians are bowed low. "Every knee shall bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."