

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 1, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JAMES 4:6

“God opposes the proud but *gives* grace to the humble.”

HOW TO BREAK FREE **(2) THE CURE FOR YOUR “I” PROBLEM**

The question we’re facing in this series of messages is this: “How do I get the power to make the changes I need to make in my life?” James 4:6 summarizes it very simply. It says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Do you know what “grace” is? Grace is the power to change. Now the Bible says that the key to power in your life is humility, and the barrier to power in your life is pride. And when I’m full of pride, I can’t change; but when I’m full of humility, then I do receive the power to change.

There are two kinds of pride talked about in the Bible:

- The good pride is self—respect, dignity, satisfaction in a job well done; joy in seeing your family and others succeed (Galatians 6:4; 2 Corinthians 7:4).
- The bad kind of pride is, of course, conceit, arrogance, an attitude of superiority, egotism. Somebody said that egotism is the only disease that when you’ve got it, it makes everybody else sick! (Proverbs 16:5; 18; 29:23).

You know, there are a lot of great stars who are not known for their humility. I think of Muhammad Ali as a typical example of a monstrous ego. One time, Ali was on a plane, and he wouldn’t fasten his seat belt. When the stewardess came up and asked him to buckle up, Ali said, “Superman doesn’t need a seat belt!” And she looked at him and said, “Superman doesn’t need an airplane!”

Now, let me ask you: How many of you would say, “I know somebody who has an ego problem”? How many of you would say, “On the other hand, I’m truly a humble person”? Pride is very easy to see in other people; it’s much more difficult to see in ourselves. The Bible says that pride causes all sorts of problems in our lives.

HOW PRIDE CAUSES PROBLEMS

1. Pride prevents me from growing. If I think I’ve got it all together, I don’t have any motivation to keep learning and developing and changing. When the head starts swelling, the mind stops growing.

Proverbs 26:12 says, “There is more hope for a fool than for a man who is wise in his own eyes.”

He's talking here about the pride that causes me to deny that I have any weaknesses. This fellow is saying, "If I knew my faults, frankly I'd be glad to work on them, but I just can't think of any of them right now!" That is an attitude of pride.

Proverbs 10:17 (Living Bible) says, "Anyone willing to be corrected is on the pathway to life. Anyone refusing has lost his chance." Pride keeps me from getting help. If I've got marriage problems, and I won't talk to anybody about it, that's pride. When I have financial problems, and I don't want to get advice about it, that's pride. When I'm not cutting it as a parent, when I'm not making it at work, and I don't want anybody to know about it, that's pride, and it keeps me from growing.

You see, most people would rather look smart than be smart. And the way to be smart is to be humble. And one of the ways to know if you have pride is just to ask yourself, "Am I teachable?"

2. Pride poisons my relationships, because the root of all conflict and disharmony is pride. When we act out of pride, we tend to be demanding and unsympathetic. "I'm going to have it my way because my way is the right way." We become rude and obnoxious. Have you ever seen prideful people ordering a waitress around in a restaurant? How demanding they are. Proud people explode with anger when they're criticized. They never want to admit it when they're wrong. Their motto is: "I'm not always right, but I'm never wrong!" And so, pride destroys relationships.

Notice what Proverbs 13:10 says, "Pride only breeds quarrels." That's a verse that every young married couple should memorize on their honeymoon! When my pride is in competition with your pride, we're going to lock horns. And the root of so many marriage problems is simply pride. You know, "I don't want to admit that you may be partially right!"

Matthew 7:5 says, "Take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Jesus is saying, "When you refuse to admit that you are part of the problem, then it causes pride, and it causes harmful relationships." So many family conflicts could be resolved, but we just don't want to admit our pride. Parents sometimes make mistakes in their relations with their children; but it's often the hardest thing in the world for a parent to say, "I'm sorry; I was wrong; please forgive me." Pride causes relationships to be damaged.

Now the key to reconciliation is simply this — swallow your pride. And do you know something? Swallowing your pride is nonfattening!

3. Pride produces unnecessary stress and anxiety because I worry too much about my "image." "How do I look?" We're in the "ME" generation, and the "ME" generation is very interested in status and position. A lot of people in Washington, D. C. are very interested in "status" — it's a big thing in the nation's capital — "What do other people think of me?"

Folks, pride, very often, is just a screen for inferiority. Have you ever watched a United Nations session on TV? The tinhorn dictators and the ambassadors from the tiniest countries in

the Third World wear six rows of braid and 110 medals, and come in all dressed up, while the leaders from the USA, Japan, Great Britain and Germany come in dressed very modestly because they're very secure.

And pride can often destroy those whom we love the most. Dr. Anthony Campolo, in a recent book, says this:

The pride of parents can lead to the destruction of children. People who are out to prove that they are better than others often use their children to achieve this end. We will never know how many children have had their lives made miserable by being pushed to achievements which make their parents look good. Children who are driven to psychological exhaustion for academic achievement often know that their labor is primarily to enhance the status of their parents. Behind the claims that the parents expect the children to do well, because success in school will increase their options, is the ugly reality that the achievements of the children visibly demonstrate the superiority of the parents. Sports are ruined for many children... the omnipresent parents are pushing their children in order to gratify their own ego needs. Another expression of the prideful exploitation of children can be witnessed in the beauty contests for teenage girls and even for children... It takes very little analysis to discover that the parents were nurturing a desire to achieve success through their children.

And then Dr. Campolo says, "Happiness is often a casualty of pride."

Pride causes stress in people's lives. Now look what the Bible says in Proverbs 29:25 (Good News Bible): "It is dangerous to be concerned with what others think of you." And Proverbs 20:27 (Good News Bible): "The Lord gave us mind and conscience; we cannot hide from ourselves."

You see, pride can cause depression, because if I'm trying to live one "image," but inside I know I'm different, then I'm going to get depressed. I may fool you, but I can't fool me! That's why Jesus said in Matthew 5:5 (Good News Bible); "Happy are those who are humble." Folks, humility is the mark of emotionally healthy people, just as pride is the mark of emotionally insecure people. If I feel I have to prove something to you, it means I'm insecure on the inside. Emotionally healthy people aren't concerned about status because they have found their satisfaction in other ways. So, let's talk now about

HOW TO BE HUMBLE AND HAPPY

Because humility and happiness go hand in hand, let me give you five things quickly out of the Bible:

1. I admit my weaknesses honestly. Look at Proverbs 28:13 (Living Bible): "A man who refuses to admit his mistakes can never be successful. But if he confesses and forsakes them, he gets another chance." That's what God says. You see, "if I don't admit my weaknesses, I can't work on them."

I heard about a teenage boy who admitted to his sister, “I’m guilty of the sin of vanity.” And his sister said, “How could you be guilty of the sin of vanity?” He said, “Because every time I see myself in the mirror, I say, ‘What a hunk!’” She said, “That’s no sin, that’s just ignorance!”

Now I know you get down on your knees by your bedside at night, and you say, “Lord, if I’ve sinned today, please forgive me.” Listen, trust me — you don’t need to say “if”! We all have weaknesses and faults and failures. So, humility starts with being honest about our weaknesses. I don’t have it all together, and neither do you.

2. I evaluate my strengths realistically because pride is based on a false evaluation of ourselves. Humility is based on truth and realism; you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. Romans 12:3 (Phillips) says, “Don’t cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your importance, but try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities...” Be realistic in your evaluation of yourself. Remember that humility does not mean putting yourself down all the time. Humility is not denying your strengths; humility is being honest about your weaknesses. The fact is, you have strengths, and you got them from God. You’re very talented in some areas, but you may be weak in other areas. I know I am. So, the Apostle bids us have a sane estimate of our capabilities. If you ever get full of pride, just make a list of all the things you don’t know how to do! Everybody is ignorant – just on different subjects!

I heard about a little girl in an ice cream parlor, and she ordered one of those “Big Tops.” And the waitress said, “Now, dear, are you sure that a little girl like you could eat all that ice cream?” She said, “Oh yes, you see, I’m much bigger on the inside than on the outside!” But pride is when we pretend we’re much bigger on the outside than we are on the inside. It’s so easy to pretend to be something that we’re not.

Notice what Galatians 6:24 says, “Each man should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself without comparing himself to somebody else...” Now, here Paul is talking about the good kind of pride – self-esteem. You can take pride in yourself for a job well done. But notice what the danger is here. You can take pride in yourself so long as you don’t compare yourself to somebody else. You see, there are two problems with comparing yourself to somebody else, (a) you find someone, and you’re doing a better job than he is, so you get filled with pride; or (b) you find someone who’s doing a better job than you, and you get full of discouragement. Either way it kills you. Don’t compare yourself. You’re unique. God made you, you! There’s nobody quite like you! If you don’t be you, who’s going to be you? So, don’t compare yourself to others.

In our culture, where everything seems to be built on competition, is it easy to avoid comparison? No, because everything in life teaches you to compare yourself. You ladies turn on TV, and you see those “Maybelline” eyes, and then you look in the mirror, and you run for the paint pot! Do you compare? The Bible says take pride in who you are, and in what God is doing in your life without comparing yourself to other people.

3. I enjoy my successes gratefully. 1 Corinthians 13:7 (Living Bible) says, “What are you so puffed up about? What do you have that God hasn’t given you? And if all you have is from God, why act as though you are so great, and as though you have accomplished something on your

own?” Everything you have comes from God. You say, “I built this business with my own two hands.” Where did you get your hands? How many of you chose the genes and chromosomes of your DNA? These things are all out of your control, and what you have is a gift of God. What you do with what you have is your gift back to God.

Remember the lesson of the whale – when you get to the top, and are just about ready to blow, that’s when you get harpooned! So, enjoy your successes gratefully, but realize where they came from.

Now again, if I want to be humble and happy —

4. I serve others unselfishly. The medical profession tells us that depression is increasing at an alarming rate among Americans. Studies find that over the last 30 years depression is epidemic among young adults. I saw an article recently called, “Boomer Blues” which stated that people born within the last 30 years face three to ten times the risk of major depression than their grandparents did. Listen to this:

The Baby Boomers are sliding into individualistic melancholy. Just as belief in the nation was crumbling, and belief in God was also fading, and the sky-rocketing divorce rate eroded belief in the family as well; when people no longer believe that their country is powerful and benevolent, and that the family can be a source of enduring unity and support, and that a relationship with God is important; where else can they turn for identity, satisfaction and hope? People then have only one alternative – to turn to themselves; and that’s what’s causing the depression.

Now the more you help other people, the more it lifts you out of yourself and your own depression. Volunteering to help makes people feel good physically and emotionally. What psychology is saying today in 1992 is what God said 2,000 years ago. Look at Philippians 2:3-5: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain deceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.... Paul is saying that real humility is not thinking poorly of yourself, it is just thinking more about other people. You get the focus off your own personal desires and you focus on what other people need. Humility is not thinking less of yourself; humility is simply thinking less about yourself. And the result is happiness. And our Model in all this is Jesus. Who was the most emotionally healthy Person Who ever walked this earth. He didn’t have to prove anything, and so He was set free to serve others. Insecure people can’t serve others; they’re too worried about their own needs. So, give yourself away — banish introspection, and focus on the needs of others. And then finally --

5. I humble myself voluntarily. James 24:10 says, “Humble yourself before the Lord, and He will (what?) lift you up.” I want you to notice that humility is a choice. The word “humble” in this verse is a verb -- it’s something that you do; you take action. If you read through the entire Bible, never once are you told to ask God to humble you. Instead it says that you are to humble yourself. It’s the way of choosing how I think and speak and act and respond to others. It’s a choice. I am to think and speak and act in a humble way.

And then there is a promise. If you humble yourself, God will lift you up. Now that's a paradox. God is saying, "The way up is down!" The more I humble myself, the more God lifts me up. The more I'm honest about my weaknesses, and grateful for my successes, and recognizing where my successes come from, the more God lifts me up. Now, the opposite is also true: just as the way up is down, so the way down is up! Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." The moment I begin to think I've got it all together, I'm setting myself up for a fall. Isaiah 124:12-15 tells us that pride was the sin that got Satan kicked out of heaven. Pride refuses to be helped; it says, "I'm my own God; I don't need anybody else to tell me how to run the shop." And none of us was made to live that way.

The worst thing about pride is that it cuts off all of the wonderful things that God wants to give me. The Bible tells us that we are saved by grace; and I told you at the beginning of this sermon that grace is the power to change. And grace is a gift; you don't deserve it and you can't earn it. You must humbly receive it from the hand of your crucified Redeemer.

One final word -- the cure for pride is this: Discover how much God really loves you, because beneath pride is an even deeper problem. Pride is a cover for massive insecurity and inferiority and inadequacy. When I act like a big shot, it's because inside I feel very small. So, I've put up a front, and wear designer clothes and do certain things that pump me up. But when you realize how much God really loves you, that you matter to Him, then you can like yourself. If God likes me, and I like me, if you don't like me, that's your problem! And yet, few people have that kind of God-given self-confidence -- the confidence that comes from humility, knowing that it's God Who has done all this in my life. When you realize how much God loves you, then all the status symbols mean nothing any more, because that's not what you're looking to for poise and power. Success and fulfillment in life come from being right in the center of God's plan. So massive doses of God's love cure the insecurity behind the pride.

I invite you to open your life completely to Christ today.

"Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

AMEN.