

There is a problem with Thanksgiving. No, I don't mean the actual day itself, even though it has gone through many changes since 1621. In fact, it wasn't until Abraham Lincoln issued his proclamation in 1863 that the holiday settled into its last-Thursday-of-November slot. There is a problem with Thanksgiving. No, I don't mean what has become of this celebration in twenty-first century America, although Black Friday store riots speak for themselves. There is a problem with Thanksgiving. No, I don't mean the meal itself, even though preparing for the feast can be stressful, and the conversations around the table can be complicated. The real problem of Thanksgiving; the real root problem of thankfulness is pride. Pride in the human heart prevents the giving of thanks. So tonight, our first item of business is to check for telltale signs that pride is creeping into our thoughts and motivations.

Now, there's also a problem with the problem. Pride can have such power over us that we don't even realize it. In other words, I can be so prideful that I don't believe I have a pride problem. It is far better to have a problem with pride and know it than to be blind to how proud you really are. In any case, our only way out of this trap is through the Word of God. What does the Word of God say about pride?

In the book of Proverbs alone, we are told that pride will bring a person down, that the Lord will "tear down the house of the proud," and that a prideful spirit leads to destruction, disgrace, and punishment. Pride prevents me from giving thanks to God, because I'm too busy thanking myself.

One way to tell if pride has taken root in your heart is to see how much comparing you do. Here's what I mean. Pride loves to compare. This can be very, very subtle; it happens almost subconsciously. Pride judges worth by comparing. My home is bigger and in a better location...my car is newer...my office is larger...I make more money...my kids behave better...my grades are better...I'm more popular...therefore, I'm better. Pride compares. Pride is obsessed with self. It is always worried about "how does this make me look?" Pride wants to be better than someone else. What is really harmful is a religious pride which does the same thing. Feelings of "I'm more spiritual," "I'm more faithful," "I'm more dedicated," are nothing more than religious pride, and religious pride is a critical problem. The danger of religious pride is twofold. It either thinks too much of the self—I'm so good, God has to bless me—or it thinks too little of the self—I'm so bad God could never accept me. Both are forms of religious pride. Both assume that what I do matters more than what God does.

So what does this have to do with thanksgiving? Everything. Pride prevents the giving of thanks to God. Pride does some horrible things. It can convince me that I'm really the one who deserves the credit for my success. It can also convince me that there's something wrong with God, because he isn't blessing me the way I think I deserve. It can also convince me that I shouldn't even darken God's door because I've been such a bad person. All of these are variations on a theme: I'm in the driver's seat. I'm the captain of my soul. What I do matters more than what God does.

But God loves us too much to let us think that way. That is the most terrifying good news you will ever hear. One example: tonight's Old Testament Reading. Through Moses, God is speaking to the Israelites, who are on the verge of entering the Promised Land, and he says this, "...you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart..." God knew that His people needed to learn humility, so He let them endure harsh conditions, and the way they handled those conditions revealed what was in their hearts. Has God ever let you go through a time of "wilderness wandering"? If so, what did it reveal? Did it help you learn humility?

The passage continues, "And he humbled you (there's that word again) and let you hunger and fed you with manna...that he might make you know that man does not live by bread

alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” A couple things here: in order to learn humility, God may let you go without—as He let the Israelites hunger—but then He provides, and what he provides is beyond our ability to imagine or create. Here in Deuteronomy, that’s manna, the bread from heaven. That’s a lesson in humility, isn’t it? God saying, “I’m providing a solution that you know nothing about, and couldn’t possibly duplicate.”

And the lesson behind the lesson: “...man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” Our greatest appetite should be for God’s Word. But this too is a lesson in humility; because if I live by every Word that comes from the mouth of the Lord, something’s got to give. Eventually, God’s going to say something I don’t like too much, and then what? Pride would say, “I don’t care too much for that, so I will go my own way.” Humility says, “Not my will, Father, but yours be done.”

And that’s the hinge on which everything turns. Returning to God; believing Him; living a thankful life; all depends on being humbled out of my pride. As you’ve heard, God will sometimes allow you to go through experiences that knock the pride right out of you, and sometimes that’s exactly what is needed. But you won’t really accept the wisdom of humility; or, you won’t voluntarily move in the direction of humility, until you come face to face with the person who embodies humility.

The Word of the Lord tells us that there is a person who was with God from before the beginning of time. And though this person was, in fact, God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing, he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Do you know why Jesus humbled himself to the point of dying a criminal’s death on a cross? It was to do what I could never do, He lived the life I am too weak to live; He died the death I was pridefully not willing to admit I needed to die. He came to exchange His life for mine; His life for yours. He came to exchange heaven for hell, not to make himself look good, but because He loves you that much. He wants heaven for you that much. It doesn’t matter who you are, or what you’ve done, or what’s been done to you.

If you believe that Jesus humbled himself for you; that what He did counts for you; if you are moved to say, “Father God, receive me and accept me not because of what I have done, but because of what Jesus has done,” at that moment, you have moved out of pride and into faith. Faith in a humble hero. And with this faith, you can know without a doubt that when God the Father looks at you, it’s with the same look of love and approval and affection that he gives his own Son.

Now there’s something to be thankful for.

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