

THE GREATEST OBSTACLE TO HAPPINESS

There is a sin ¹ that I believe causes God more grief than any other. I am not referring to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—the so-called “unforgivable” sin ²—for I suspect very few souls are jeopardized by that particular offense. Nor am I talking about murder, torture, or any sexual misbehavior. As harmful as those can be, their impact is dwarfed by another transgression, which is both far more pervasive and far more harmful, when viewed from God’s perspective. I speak of pride.

Now I am *not* talking about “pride” in the sense of positive self-esteem, or the satisfaction of a job well done. I am instead talking about the haughty pride that convinces us that we—as individuals or collectively as the human race—are self-sufficient, self-made, and self-important. This is conceit that revels in human accomplishments and human potential, while ignoring the inevitability of death and decay. Both the Old and New Testaments denounce this type of pride:

¹ One source defines sin as any human action or purpose that is contrary to God’s will. “The sum of all the commandments likewise is love; sin in its nature is egotism and selfishness. Self is put in the place of God. . . . Selfishness . . . is at the bottom of all disobedience, and it becomes hostility to God when it collides with His law.” (*New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, in *Bible Explorer 4* software) Another defines sin as any transgression of God’s law. (*Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*, at 1 John 3:4, in *Bible Explorer 4* software) The Greek word is *hamartia*, which means “a missing of the mark”—the “mark” being God’s will or God’s law. (*Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary*, at 1 John 3:4, in *Bible Explorer 4* software) Simply put, “sin” means to fall short of what God wants us to be. See Romans 3:23.

² See Matthew 12:31-32, Mark 3:28-29, and Luke 12:10.

The nature of this unforgivable sin has been widely (and wildly) debated. Personally, I believe a person commits this sin when he or she knows that Christianity is True, yet deliberately and consciously rejects that Truth and chooses to live and speak contrary to it. (See, for example, 2 Peter 2:20-22.) In my experience, such people are rare, because the vast majority of those who truly understand, accept, and live the Truth of Christianity find such peace and contentment that they would never want to go back to living in darkness again. Thus, those who reject Christianity out of ignorance, misunderstanding, or skepticism—and at one time I was all of those—have **not** committed the unforgivable sin.

Furthermore, no one who wants to give their life to Christ has committed this unforgivable sin. Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. . . .” (John 6:44) A person who has committed the “unforgivable sin” will no longer be drawn to Christ by the Father—so if you want to come to Christ, you can be sure you have **not** committed the unforgivable sin.

“Boast no more so very proudly,
Do not let arrogance come out of your mouth;
For the LORD is a God of knowledge,
And with Him actions are weighed.”³

But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.⁴

These are but two of many examples that can be quoted.⁵ The Bible warns that God will judge and punish such arrogant pride.⁶ On the other hand, the Bible encourages humility and gentleness:

“Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”⁷

Let your gentle *spirit* be known to all men. The Lord is near.⁸

A man’s pride will bring him low,
But a humble spirit will obtain honor.⁹

³ 1 Samuel 2:3 (all Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* translation)

⁴ James 4:16

⁵ See, for example: Exodus 10:3; Deuteronomy 8:14; 2 Kings 19:22; 2 Chronicles 33:23, 36:12; Job 33:17, 35:12, 40:11-12; Psalms 5:5, 10:2-4, 31:17-18, 36:11, 40:4, 59:12, 73:3-6, 75:4-5, 86:14, 94:2-4, 119:51, 119:69, 119:78, 119:85, 119:122, 123:4, 131:1, 140:5; Proverbs 8:13, 11:2, 14:16, 16:18-19, 18:12, 21:4, 21:24, 27:1-2, 28:25, 29:23, 30:12-13; Isaiah 37:23; Jeremiah 9:23, 43:2, 48:29-30; Dan 5:20-23; Hosea 5:5, 7:10; Obadiah 1:3; Habakkuk 2:4-5; Zephaniah 3:11; Malachi 3:13-15; Mark 7:22; Romans 1:30, 11:20; 1 Corinthians 3:21, 4:6-7, 4:18-19, 5:2, 5:6, 8:1-2, 13:4; 2 Corinthians 10:17-18, 12:20; Galatians 5:26; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 2:3; 1 Timothy 3:6, 6:3-4, 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:2, 3:4; James 3:14, 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; 2 Peter 2:18; 1 John 2:16; Revelation 13:5.

⁶ See, for example: Leviticus 23:29, 26:19; 1 Samuel 2:3-4; 2 Kings 19:28; 2 Chronicles 26:16-21, 32:25; Psalms 101:5, 119:21; Proverbs 15:25, 16:5; Isaiah 2:10-12, 2:17, 3:16-17, 5:15, 9:9-11, 10:12, 13:11, 16:6-7, 23:8-9, 25:10-12, 28:1-3, 37:29; Jeremiah 13:9, 13:15-17, 48:25-26, 49:16, 50:29-32; Ezekiel 7:10-12, 7:24, 16:49-50, 16:56-57, 24:21, 24:25, 30:6, 30:18-19, 32:12, 33:28; Dan 4:37; Hosea 13:6-8; Amos 6:8; Zephaniah 2:8-11; Zechariah 9:6, 10:11; Malachi 4:1; Matthew 23:12; Luke 1:51-52

⁷ Matthew 18:4

⁸ Philippians 4:5

⁹ Proverbs 29:23; see also: Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:27-29, 23:32, 26:40-41; Numbers 29:7; Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 8:16; 2 Chronicles 7:14, 33:23, 36:12; Ezra 8:21; Psalms 10:17-18, 25:9, 37:11, 76:9; Proverbs 11:2, 15:33, 16:19, 18:12, 22:4; Isaiah 66:2; Micah 6:8; Zephaniah 2:3; Matthew 5:5, 23:12; Luke 1:51-52, 14:7-11, 18:9-14; 1 Corinthians 1:27-31; 13:4; Galatians

Jesus exemplified these qualities of humility and gentleness:

“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.”¹⁰

So did Paul of Tarsus.¹¹ Many Old Testament characters—some of whom were guilty of grievous offenses—received God’s favor and mercy by humbling themselves before Him: David,¹² Ahab,¹³ Josiah,¹⁴ Rehoboam,¹⁵ Hezekiah,¹⁶ and Manasseh.¹⁷

What is it about God and humility? Why is He so ready to forgive the humble, meek, and lowly, while taking a hard line against the boastful and supercilious? I will concede that the latter are often annoying, and sometimes downright aggravating, but they inflict very little real human pain and suffering. Viewed solely from that standpoint, haughtiness would seem to be almost trivial in its effects compared to murder, rape, or even theft. So why does arrogance upset God so much? To understand that, I think we must look beyond this earthly life.

God is eternal, and for that reason He has a completely different perspective than we do. We are often consumed with the needs and troubles of this life; God understands that this is but a moment compared with eternity. So He is much more concerned about our eternal souls. And from God’s eternal perspective, pride is terribly destructive.

Pride cost Adam and Eve the Garden of Eden.¹⁸ The serpent enticed Eve to disobey God by appealing to her inflated view of her own potential, telling her that if she ate the forbidden fruit, “you will be like God.”¹⁹ Arrogant pride leads us to

5:22-23, 6:1; Ephesians 4:1-2; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12; 1 Timothy 3:2-3, 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:24-25; Titus 3:1-2; James 1:9-10, 1:21, 3:17-18, 4:6, 4:10; 1 Peter 2:18-19, 3:1, 3:4-5, 3:8-9, 3:15, 5:5-6

¹⁰ Matthew 11:29; see also Zechariah 9:9 (compare Matthew 21:4-5); Philippians 2:8

¹¹ See Acts 20:19; 2 Corinthians 10:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:7.

¹² 2 Samuel 6:21-22; see also 2 Samuel 12:13 and 12:16-17

¹³ 1 Kings 21:27-29

¹⁴ 2 Kings 22:18-20; 2 Chronicles 34:26-28

¹⁵ 2 Chronicles 12:5-8, 12:12

¹⁶ 2 Chron 32:26

¹⁷ 2 Chron 33:12-13

¹⁸ Whether you believe the story of Adam and Eve is history, parable, or allegory, the lesson about the dangers of pride is the same.

¹⁹ Genesis 3:5

believe that we can do just fine without God: we don't need to obey God, because we can make our own decisions about right and wrong; we don't need God's help, because we are independent and self-reliant; we don't need to pray to God, because we are in control of our own lives. This arrogant pride keeps us from surrendering ourselves to God,²⁰ by persuading us that we don't really need to do so. In short, pride pushes and pulls us away from God. And the effects are devastating.

When we reject God, we miss out on the life we could have if we would just surrender our lives to Him. Pride builds barriers between us and God, by directing our focus toward ourselves and away from Him. The psalmist knew this truth:

The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek *Him*.
All his thoughts are, "There is no God."²¹

Moses knew it, too. He warned the Israelites not to become proud and forget about God.²² And yet the people of God repeatedly fell into this trap. King Uzziah, a good and successful king of Judah, contracted leprosy because he let his vanity get out of control.²³ The pride of the Israelites²⁴ led them to abandon their faith in God.²⁵ More than 100 years later, in the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the Jewish²⁶ people still had not learned this lesson.²⁷ Even Jesus spoke of the dangers of pride:

²⁰ For other Biblical examples of how pride comes between men and God, see: Judges 7:2; 2 Chronicles 32:24-26; Job 35:12; Psalms 20:7-8; Proverbs 30:11-14; Isaiah 10:12-15; Jeremiah 9:23-24, 23:31-32; Ezekiel 16:49-50; Daniel 5:18-23; Malachi 3:13-15; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, 3:18-21, 8:1-2; 1 Timothy 3:4-6, 6:3-5; 2 Tim 3:1-4; James 4:4-10; 2 Peter 2:18-19; 1 John 2:15-16.

²¹ Psalms 10:4

²² Deuteronomy 8:11-14 (emphasis added)

²³ See 2 Chronicles 26:3-21. King Uzziah's pride led him to try to usurp the role of the priests by burning incense in the Temple, a task which was reserved for the priests. 2 Chronicles 26:16-18.

²⁴ After Solomon's death, his kingdom was divided in two, with the kingdom of Israel in the north, and the kingdom of Judah in the south. See 1 Kings 11:9-13, 12:12-20; 2 Chronicles 10:12-19.

²⁵ See Hosea 13:6: "As *they had* their pasture, they became satisfied, And being satisfied, their heart became proud; Therefore they forgot Me." Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel during the 8th century B.C. (approximately 770 to 720 B.C.).

²⁶ The Jews were the residents of the southern kingdom of Judah, from which the term, "Jew," is derived.

²⁷ See Jeremiah 13:8-10 and 13:15-17. (Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah about 626 to 586 B.C.)

And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”²⁸

When we surrender ourselves to God, we aren’t in control anymore—and frankly, we *want* that control. Indeed, we prize our independence so highly that many people do not even recognize pride as being wrong. They confuse it with self-confidence or emotional strength, while ridiculing humility as a character trait of the weak. This fact distinguishes pride from almost all other sins. Most murderers and rapists at least know they’ve done wrong. The prideful seldom do. They embrace the very evil which separates them from God—and they are happy to do so.

In Jesus’ own time, many wicked people flocked to Him and John the Baptist, seeking (and finding) forgiveness.²⁹ But the Jewish religious leaders rejected Him. Their haughtiness would not let them consider the possibility that someone so very different from themselves could be God’s Messiah.³⁰ They could not understand how this simple, untrained carpenter from Galilee could possibly be right and they be wrong. And so they missed out.

God wants us to have happiness, peace, and contentment in this life, as well as eternal life after we die. But our pride blinds us to this truth. Pride keeps us searching for answers to life’s mysteries, instead of accepting the Answer God has provided. Because of pride, people seek happiness through their own efforts—through, for example, money, possessions, power, fame, drugs, alcohol, marriage, sex, children, etc.—and come to God, if at all, only after realizing that these things

²⁸ Matthew 18:2-4; see also Mark 7:20-23 (pride defiles a man) and Luke 18:9-14 (the humble tax collector, rather than the conceited Pharisee, leaves the Temple justified)

²⁹ See, for example, Mathew 9:10-13, 11:19, 21:31-32; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32, 7:34, 7:36-48, 15:1-2, 19:1-10.

³⁰ Jesus points out the inflated self-importance of the Jewish religious leaders in such verses as Matthew 23:5-7, Mark 12:38-40, Luke 11:43, 16:15, 18:9-14, 20:46; and John 9:39-41. This, as well as the leaders’ hypocrisy and self-righteousness, led to friction between them and both Jesus and John the Baptist, which is evident in the following verses: Matthew 3:7-9, 5:20, 9:3, 9:11, 9:34, 12:2, 12:10-14, 12:22-24, 12:38-39, 15:1-2, 15:12, 16:1-4, 16:21, 17:3-9, 20:18-19, 21:15-16, 21:33-46, 22:15, 23:1-7, 23:13-33, 26:59, 26:65-66, 27:41-43, 27:62-63; Mark 2:6-7, 2:16, 2:24, 3:6, 3:22, 7:5, 8:11, 8:15, 8:31, 10:2-9, 10:32-34, 11:15-18, 11:27-33, 12:13-15, 14:1, 14:43, 14:55, 14:63-65, 15:31-32; Luke 5:20-21, 5:30, 5:33, 6:2, 6:6-11, 7:28-30, 7:36-49, 9:22, 11:37-54, 12:1, 15:1-2, 16:14-15, 19:37-40, 19:47, 20:1-26, 20:45-47, 22:2, 22:66-71, 23:10; John 7:31-32, 7:45-49, 8:3-6, 8:13, 9:13-16, 9:39-41, 11:47-53, 11:57, 12:42-43.

ultimately do not satisfy. They cannot satisfy us, because we need that for which we were created: to have a loving relationship with our Heavenly Father. And God is anxious to have that relationship with us.³¹

I believe He suffers the pain we inflict on ourselves and others when we deny ourselves this loving relationship with our Creator. But until we come back to God, we see none of this—because of our pride. And that is what makes pride so pernicious. Of all the evils in the world, pride is the one most responsible for keeping us apart from God. As a result, we suffer harm that goes well beyond the suffering of this life. Tragically, our pride does not merely keep us out of Heaven—*it keeps us from even trying to get there*. And sometimes it motivates us to try to keep others from getting there, too, just as the Jewish religious leaders did in Jesus' day.³²

But the destructiveness of pride does not stop there. If this were a disease that afflicted only a few, it would cause relatively little harm. Unfortunately, pride is one of the most common of all evils. It afflicts all of us to some degree. Everyone likes to be right. For me, being wrong feels like losing, and nobody likes to lose. Perhaps the most difficult words to say in any language are “I was wrong” and “I'm sorry.” Instead of humbling ourselves and admitting our failures, the natural reaction is to try to justify our conduct—perhaps by blaming others, by claiming that “everyone does it,” or by focusing on the worthwhile goal that we believe excuses our conduct. Too often our pride overrides our very real need to admit we are wrong and to ask for forgiveness—from the people we love, and from God.

To be reconciled to God, we must let go of our pride. We must humble ourselves, admit our failures, ask God for forgiveness, and submit ourselves to His authority. In short, we must surrender our lives to Him.³³ He, in turn, will love us, care for us, comfort us, and grant us eternal life. And ironically, He will also exalt us: “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”³⁴

³¹ See the articles, “Our Father” and “For God So Loved . . . Well, Wait a Minute,” on this web site.

³² For example, see Matthew 23:13: “ ‘But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.’ ” See also: Matthew 23:15 and Luke 11:52.

³³ For more on this subject, see the article, “For God So Loved . . . Well, Wait a Minute,” on this web site.

³⁴ James 4:10; see also, Matthew 23:12; Luke 1:52, 14:11, 18:14; 1 Peter 5:6