

Pride and Prejudice?

Sterling UMC
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Luke 14:1,7-14

If you've ever walked the aisles at BLOCKBUSTER looking for a video to rent-then you know that the movies Hollywood produces tend to fall into one of several basic categories. There are action films, science fiction films, drama films, comedy films, family films, romantic films, and so on. And...one of the more popular types of films has always seemed to be *"the disaster epic."* This category includes films like TITANIC and TWISTER ... DANTE'S PEAK and ARMAGEDDON. I remember when I was a teen going to see a particular disaster epic entitled, The POSEIDEN ADVENTURE. This movie was based on what I believe was a true story of an ocean liner in the '60's that was struck by a mountain-sized tidal wave.

And, although the huge ship was lifted and thrown like a toy, it didn't sink but instead was flipped completely upside down so that the upper decks were submerged and the only part of the ship remaining above the surface was the bottom part. I think it is called the *"keel."* In the movie, there was central group of characters (about eight passengers) led by Gene Hackman who was playing the part of a Catholic Priest. This group realized that their only way up to the surface and safety was to go *"down"* through the lower decks. For these frightened individuals the way *"up"*-the way to life and rescue-was literally *"down."* During their climb up lower decks they encountered many other survivors who thought Hackman's plan was ridiculous. Even though everything was upside down they were so disoriented that they just knew that the way to be saved was to head for the bridge and the upper decks not the lower ones.

There is one pivotal scene in which a large group of survivors led by the ship's doctor met Hackman and his small entourage and ridiculed them for their proposed route to rescue and then the larger group parted ways with the smaller group; one heading *"down"* to safety and the larger group heading *"up"* to drowning and death. I remember this being such an intense and suspenseful film that held me spellbound on the edge of my seat that when Hackman's group finally made it to the blue-skied surface I breathed a sigh of relief as if I had actually been trapped inside that ship along with them.

You know when our Lord entered our world He modeled a different perspective on things. In coming and dying for our sins, He in essence said, *"The way up....the way to life and fulfillment and joy is not to put self and personal needs first....NO....the way up is DOWN...the way to find happiness is to become a servant and put the needs of others first."* And this is exactly opposite of the way our society tends to look at things. The vast majority of the people in our world tend to think that the way up is UP.....the way to GAIN is to get. They would think that to do otherwise would be absurd. I love this quote from Bill Hybel's book, *Descending Into Greatness*. He writes:
"In the vocabulary of our world "DOWN" is a word reserved for losers, cowards, and the bear market. It is a word to be avoided or ignored....it is a word that negatively colors whatever it touches. We say: DOWN and out, DOWNfall, DOWNsize, DOWNhearted

and worst of all, DOWN under. And down's antonym is 'UP' -- a word in our high-voltage society that has come to be cherished and worshiped....a word reserved to describe winners and heroes. Unlike the word, 'down,' 'up' positively colors whatever it touches. We say things like: UPscale, UP and coming, UPper class, and UPWARDLY MOBILE. We believe in ASCENDING to fame, money, power, comfort, and pleasure. In our society UP is clearly the direction of greatness. From the world's perspective, it is the only way to go...just as a compass needle points north, the human needle points UP."

This is exactly the attitude that Jesus encountered in our Scripture lesson this morning from Luke's gospel. In this passage we find that Jesus has gone to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee. As he is looking around at the people gathered he noticed how the guests were all seeking to find places of honor at the table and looking down at those they felt were beneath them. Disturbed by this attitude and behavior, Jesus teaches them a lesson by telling a parable which he concludes with these powerful words, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Like a tidal wave, Jesus crashed into their and our worldly way of thinking and flips things. He turns everything upside down by teaching that if you truly want to be great, you must go down. You must descend into greatness. You see, according to Jesus' way of thinking, greatness is not a measure of self-will but self-abandonment. The more you give, the more you gain.

And, Christians who have embraced this philosophy of greatness Christians who have committed themselves to a servant lifestyle....have discovered something. Unlike their peers in the world, who strive to be UPWARDLY MOBILE and end up drowning in emptiness and frustration. Unlike them, Christians who are DOWNWARDLY MOBILE find fulfillment, and joy in life. They discover that you REALLY DO gain when you follow Jesus' example and give yourself way. They have learned in essence that the way "UP" is "DOWN." The way to happiness and meaning during their three score and ten years on this planet is to humble themselves and put the needs of others above their own. Living this way allows them to experience first hand the quality of existence Jesus promised when He said, *"I am come that you might have LIFE and LIFE in all its fullness."* (John 10:10)

This morning, I want to speak to you about two things that prevent us from attaining this "upside-down" lifestyle. They are pride and prejudice.

There is no secret here. These two vices have been a constant source of pain and frustration separating us from God's ideal for all humankind almost from the very beginning.

What is pride? SELF is the FOCUS of pride. Pride seeks to defend and advance SELF in every way possible. It is pride that leads us to view every issue as a contest that must be determined by a "winner" and a "loser". It is pride that leads us to conclude that we know better or that our experience is more significant or our understanding is

superior to that of another. It is pride that concludes that the *other guy's* problem is pride.

No one has said it any better than C.S. Lewis:

“There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty of themselvesThe essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”

That's pride. What about prejudice? Well it is closely related to pride. For you see at the deepest level, pride is the choice to exclude both God and other people from their rightful place in our hearts. Jesus said that the essence of a Godly lifestyle is to love God and to love people-and extreme pride destroys our capacity to love either. Pride leads us to love only self. And this leads us to judge rather than to serve...to bow down before a mirror rather than before God. Again C.S. Lewis writes, "A proud person is always looking down on things and people: and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see Something that is above you."

So how do we get rid of these two scourges of pride and prejudice and develop within us a humble heart and live the way that Jesus has taught us to live? Three things:

1. Develop a humble heart by seeing ourselves in light of God's grace. This is good advice for us to heed in our battle with pride because in order to defeat it we must remember that as the Psalmist says, "The Lord is God. It is He Who has made us and not we ourselves. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture." (Psalm 100:1-3) Paul echoes this attitude in 1 Corinthians 15:10 where he says "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. I worked harder than all of them-yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." In other words, Paul didn't take himself too seriously. He counteracted pride with the knowledge that anything good that he did was due to the grace of God.

To free ourselves from pride we must do the same thing-remembering that as James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father." And of course the most important PERFECT GIFT to remember is the gift of God's only Son. Above all else, this memory will help us see ourselves in the proper light. You see, when we look to the cross, we remember our sin. We remember that if it weren't for Jesus' death on our behalf we would be separated us from God and destined for Hell. Do you remember the words to this beloved hymn?

"When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but lost, and pour contempt on all my pride."

You see, the way to defeat pride is to re-direct it-to change it. When we remember that anything good in us is only because of the grace of God, we transform conceit into praise.

2. We are to See Others As Jesus Saw Them

The Bible says in Philippians 2:3-5 *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility, consider others better than yourselves. Look not to your own interests, but also the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ."* What was Jesus Christ's attitude? He focused on the needs of others.

Think about the example of our Lord,

- He commended the contribution of the widow at the temple over the large sums of the rich because "she gave all she had"
- He spent time telling a Samaritan woman who had three strikes against her (she was a Samaritan, a woman, and had a bad reputation) about the living water He could provide for her.
- He went to the home of the tax-collector Zaccheus for dinner. He made another tax-collector (Matthew) one of his disciples.
- He touched and cared for the lepers who were considered outcasts and defiled those with whom they came into contact.
- He called into service a rag-tag group of commoners to be His disciples instead of the religious elite.
- Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor"
- In the book of Acts, Jesus called on the anti-Christian zealot by the name of Saul and made him the preeminent missionary and first church theologian renaming him, Paul.

Jesus was unimpressed by the cover a person wore. He looked at the heart. Since Jesus looked at the heart of people rather than their appearance or their income statements, we, as his followers, should scorn all superficial rankings.

3. Give ourselves away in service to others. This is the greatest antidote to pride and prejudice, giving yourself away to help others. When you're helping others you can't think about yourself. The way you live more humbly in order to live more happily is to give your life away. Serve others unselfishly.

This is the "downwardly-mobile" lifestyle that Jesus taught. Jesus said, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Jesus said give your life away. Lose your life to find it. If you want to follow me then deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. If you want to be great, be the servant of all. Only in giving our lives away do we find true happiness.

James 4:10 says it this way, *"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up."* That's the paradox. God is saying that the way up is down. The more I humble myself, the more God lifts me up.

The opposite is also true. Proverbs 16:18 *"Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall."* The moment I start getting filled with pride, the moment I think I've got it all together, I'm pretending that I've got all the answers, I'm setting myself up for a fall.

Ultimately the cure for pride and prejudice is this: Discover how much God really loves you. How does that cure my problem? When you really realize how much God loves you, when you understand that you matter to God, when you really have sensed his love and realize the depth of His love all of the status symbols mean nothing any more.

Massive doses of God's love cures the insecurity behind the pride. I invite you to open your heart to Jesus Christ today. Swallow your pride and humbly submit yourself to God's grace. James 4:6 *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

You know, as Christians, we commit to live *"downwardly mobile"* lives in response to all that Christ has done for us. We love others because God has first loved us. And we close our service by inviting you to respond to God's love in Christ. If you are not a Christian then we invite you to make that commitment to Christ now. Maybe you're here and you feel like you're headed in the wrong direction in the ship of life. You've tried all the things the world has to offer and have discovered that *"up"* isn't all it's cracked up to be. If so, then I invite you today to turn and head in the right direction.