

## Getting it Right: Session Four

### Pride: Philippians 2:5-8

Our continuing theme is right living. We need to “get it right” if we are to be part of the solution rather than the problem. The “problem” in this case is not progressing God’s Kingdom (the one of the *here and now*) to the point God has to intervene and course correct. This “lessening operator error” facet is at the heart of living in the balance between right belief (orthodoxy) and right practice/living (orthopraxis). Which is easier? Silly question, right? Before Paul, Aristotle wrote: *We all know what we ought to do, give or take a few details, but we all manage, at least some of the time, not to do it.* The key words in his statement: *at least some of the time.* If we can live right most of the time, that’s a victory. If we can live right more of the time, that’s a deft goal. Both of these are win-wins for any of us, so how do we get better at *better living*? How do we put more *right* in right-living?

Possibly it’s about freedom, or better stated, what we do with our freedom. N.T. Wright’s answer to the central gist of Christianity is this: *It is all about the belief that the living God, in fulfillment of his promises and as the climax of the story of Israel, has accomplished all this – the finding, the saving, the giving of new life – in Jesus. A new door has swung open in the cosmos through Jesus which can never again be shut. The door of freedom.*

Obviously, freedom is a good thing, until it isn’t. Freedom neglected, abused, taken for granted or completely ignored works against the concept (and gift). So, again, what do we do? One option is to make it a front burner issue and a way to do that is through introspection. Let’s go back to the mirror analogies:

*Christian sin is derivative of and dependent upon what Christians know about God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We thought we were good people until we met Jesus. Jesus became for us not only a window into the heart of God, but also a mirror held up to us to show us the hard truth about ourselves (Willimon).*

*We thought we were good people until we met Jesus.* Classic line and so very true and so very uncomfortable. We have the freedom to ignore the spiritual mirror God provides, but the exercise of that freedom will lead us away from, rather than, closer to, God. And let's be honest, looking into an actual mirror isn't all it's cracked up to be. I wake up some mornings and hardly recognize the guy staring back at me – hey, *didn't you used to have more hair? Your beard was darker, right? And what's going on under your eyes?* No, mirror gazing is rarely fun and that's especially true of *spiritual mirror gazing*.

*Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?*

*Whoever wants to see the form of his naked soul should make wisdom his mirror* (Aristotle)

*Truth is removal of the veil* (Plato)

Steven James wrote *Becoming Real*, a book about peeling away the pretenses so we can be ourselves; honest with God and others; up-front about who we are; transparent about our motives; a world where religion is not a show, it's real (obviously he has a very good book publicist). He spends time on the values of scripture as our introspective-mirror:

*Who wouldn't want to be called the fairest or the bravest or the strongest or the kindest or the wisest of them all? Who wouldn't want to wake up every morning and have the mirror give compliments? Too bad that only happens in fairy tales. In real life, mirrors don't praise us, they reveal the truth about us. They don't flatter us, they unveil us. There's nothing like looking into a mirror to shock us back to reality. Because mirrors don't lie. They show the warts and the wrinkles, the gray hair and the varicose veins, the bags under our eyes and the extra baggage around our waists, the scars and the pimples and the receding hairlines. Mirrors remind us we're not as flawless as we like to think we are.*

Let's rearrange his final sentence into a more positive perspective: *Mirrors remind us of our flaws and in so doing we are better able to deal with them.* Personally, I stopped believing I have few flaws several years back. I have my share of flaws

and possibly a few extra. My goal now, especially at my particular station of life, is to deal with my obvious, and my not-as-obvious, flaws. I really and truly want to get this whole life thing right. The best way to accomplish this continues to be scripture reading, introspection and reflection on what we have read, followed by a prayer of commitment to move in a more Godly-focused direction. When we do this it's amazing what we find.

Lately I've been focused (O.K., fixated) on the sin of pride. The whole *getting it right* process requires us to be honest about our flaws, issues and strongest weaknesses. Admitting the problem is step one; addressing the problem are all the next steps. So, what are copping to? What is pride exactly? Is it always bad? From the early church fathers, to the formative early theologians, to today, pride is seen as the root of most all other evil acts and attitudes.

*Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked are sin*

*Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord*

*Pride is your greatest enemy; humility is your greatest friend* (John R.W. Stott)

*Pride is the Queen of vices* (Gregory the Great)

*The first sin, the source of all other sins, and the worst sin* (Thomas Aquinas)

*The first and worst cause of errors that abound in our day and age is spiritual pride* (Jonathan Edwards)

*According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through pride the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind* (C.S. Lewis)

Our theology of the Satan figure is dodgy at best due to the lack of coherent scriptural support, but few see the Garden of Eden serpent as the actual Satan. No matter its origins, the Serpent is a devious, scheming, nasty little player who assisted the first created people in engaging in their new-found freedom to make

bad choices. In their encounter in the still ideal Garden the serpent contradicted God's instructions in a way that appealed to the primal pride residing in all of us. In this case it was, "hey, you guys have it made here. Look around, you and God are in sync, you're in community, you're so close...but is it fair that he told you to not do something? *In this place? Rules?* Hey, look at this fruit. You are so close to knowing like God knows, seeing all God sees, He just didn't want to share all of the good stuff with you."

Soon autonomy looked better than selfless devotion; self-deception gave in to desire for something beyond anything they needed. The root was pride. Not being O.K. with God seeking to define us is pride at work; all that follows is sin. Many, many years later James lays it out for us:

But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death (1:14-15).

We need to be honest about not knowing with confidence the origin of Satan, the Devil or evil. Evil certainly pre-existed the creation of humans in the Creation/Garden of Eden story, but that doesn't automatically mean the Serpent-character was actually Satan. All we know is that human choice was part of the original deal and that evil was in place before we humans were created. But, we do know there is a popular teaching about fallen angels who were tossed from heaven and truly broke bad when they took up residence on earth. Julian Spriggs writes:

*The popular teaching about the origin of Satan normally follows this, or a similar, outline: Satan was once a beautiful angel, the greatest of all created beings. He, Lucifer, rebelled against God and became the Devil before creation. Originally there were three archangels, Michael, Gabriel and Lucifer; each ruled one-third of the angels. Michael and Gabriel remained faithful to God, but Lucifer rebelled, taking one-third of the angels with him, who became the demonic forces.*

Apparently, Lucifer was so impressed with his own beauty, intelligence, power and position he began to desire for himself the honor and glory that belonged to

God alone. His pride represents the beginning of sin in the created world. If it happened this way, pride drove the fall of Lucifer and one-third of all angels in heaven. Again, it distills down to discontent with being the person God desires us to be; the desire behind wanting to move beyond being created so we can be like God; do God-things; have God's vision; know things only God knows. Each and all of these are pride-fueled.

Apparently, Adam, Eve and Lucifer took a bite of that fruit and they all fell (which is what the oft-misquoted Proverbs 16:18 sort of says): "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."

Later we see the Satan figure attempting to sway Jesus during his desert experience. "Hey, I'll tempt him with all the grandiose sweets that always work. He will fall for the *"you too can be God"* trick. Everyone does.

Coming out of his baptism and filled with the Spirit's power Jesus sets out into the desert, where the Satan awaits: *You're hungry, it's been days since you've eaten, so if you're the Son of God, command this rock to become a loaf of bread.* There were two levels of pride being played here: first, you are hungry after the many long days of prayer and fasting. Turning a rock into bread is just a voice command away; and second, the humanitarian implications of that particular act would make him the most popular person in the world. Probably a big-time award in the wings for meeting the entire world's hunger needs with rocks. Jesus declines.

*O.K., look out there and you'll see all the kingdoms of the world. I'll give them to you. Say the word and all the glory and all the authority will be yours. All of this has been given over to me and I will give it to anyone I please. All you must do is worship me* (Satan). Pride-genes get all perky when ruling the world is on the table. Again, Jesus declines.

Luke tells us a fully unsuccessful Satan goes away "until an opportune time." We know this to be near the end of the Jesus story. William Willimon describes it this way:

As Jesus hangs on the cross in mortal agony, the devil's words are repeated nearly verbatim. The soldiers, those in the employ of the Kingdoms of this

world,” mock Jesus, saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself” (Luke 23:37). And the crowd (that’s us) screams, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” (23:39). Satan doesn’t have to tempt Jesus this time. Now the devil’s words are on our lips.

*If you are the Son of God then act like it!*

*Act like our definition of God.*

*Act like who we want as Messiah!*

*Don’t be who God says you are; be who **we** say you are!*

“Jesus just hangs there in humiliation and defeat, in weakness and shame. He says no to the Devil with his silence. The last temptation of Christ takes place as He hangs on the cross, His last temptation to be the God we thought we deserved” (Willimon).

So, maybe that’s it. We choose to be the person God wants us to be, which by the way is not the person we deserve to be, or we opt to be someone else entirely. The key to “getting it right?” Avoiding pride.

Pride pushes us away from becoming the person God wants us to be and a lack of pride, AKA humility, allows us to be the person God wants us to be.

Somewhere between pride and humility lies spiritual success and failure in this life.

Right living depends on making the right choice, which by the way we must make over and over again. It’s a daily decision.

Paul details the humility of Jesus in his letter to the Philippian church in 2:5-8 (two versions provided).

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of Himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of Himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, He set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, He stayed human. It was an

incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, He lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion (The Message Bible).

And consider the example that Jesus, the Anointed One, has set before us. Let His mindset become your motivation. He existed in the form of God, yet He gave no thought to seizing equality with God as His supreme prize. Instead He emptied himself of His outward glory by reducing Himself to the form of a lowly servant. He became human! He humbled himself and became vulnerable, choosing to be revealed as a man and was obedient. *He was a perfect example*, even in His death – a criminal's death by crucifixion (The Passion Translation).

Jesus resisted pride and chose humility. He chose meekness (power under control) by opting to be humble. To “get it right” we must as well.

Amen and Amen

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