

I'd like to begin this morning by reviewing the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, as related to us in the beginning of the book of the Prophet Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a flourishing tree that brought joy and health to the world. In the dream, a watcher, a holy one, what we'd think of as an angel, came down from heaven and declared that the tree should be chopped down, and the stump left in the ground but bound with iron bands. The watcher then says, "Let his heart be changed from that of a man, Let him be given the heart of a beast, And let seven times pass over him." Daniel declares to Nebuchadnezzar that the tree represents the king himself, and because of his pride, God would humble him through madness. Once Nebuchadnezzar learned that God was over all and that he, Nebuchadnezzar, was not comparable to the Most High God, that the king's sanity and kingdom would be restored.

In verse 29 we then read, "At the end of the twelve months he was walking about the royal palace of Babylon. The king spoke, saying, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty? While the word was still in the king's mouth, a voice fell from heaven: 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you!'" That very hour the word which was spoken to King Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. Nebuchadnezzar went mad and was driven into the fields to live as a beast for seven years.

The end of the chapter reads:

And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever:

For His dominion *is* an everlasting dominion,
And His kingdom *is* from generation to generation.
All the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing;
He does according to His will in the army of heaven
And *among* the inhabitants of the earth.
No one can restrain His hand
Or say to Him, "What have You done?"

At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my honor and splendor returned to me. My counselors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works *are* truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down.

Pride. It was considered by the ancients in the faith to be the root of all sin. Satan's sin was that of pride. He believed himself to be the source of the glory that had been created in Him by God. Thus he rebelled against God, aspiring to be himself god, and was, like Nebuchadnezzar, cast down. In His spite and hate, Satan then sought out our destruction through our first mother, Eve, who fell into sin by an appeal to her pride. "Your eyes will be opened and you will be like God." And we read today in the epistle lesson that the devil still seeks our destruction, walking about as a roaring lion seeking out whomever he may devour. The text implies that those who are proud, who lack humility, are particularly prone to become prey of the devil.

We all, in our unique ways, struggle with the sin of pride. The sin of our adversary the devil afflicts us all. The worst part is that we do not stop to consider how prideful we are. We are prideful in thinking we don't have to worry about pride. The heart is deceitful above all things, after all. We are not guarded against this sin. Therefore it is a vicious sin that will lead us unwittingly to destruction.

So what is pride more precisely? It is a sin of the thoughts, a sin of the mind, an intellectual sin. It is not connected to an action *per se*, but as the primary sin, it leads to all of the other sins of thought, word, and deed. We commit this sin when we put ourselves at the center of our thoughts. Pride makes a false god, an idol, of the self and displaces the True God from His rightful place of rule in our lives.

Now, it doesn't seem to me that very many people wander around thinking to themselves, "I am God, so I can do whatever I want." And yet, to live without a conscious deference to God, a willful submission to His rule in our lives, is to make oneself out to be god. To neglect God is to be prideful. God created us for the purpose of receiving His love and then returning His love back to Him. If we do not participate in this exchange, then we deny the ultimate end for which we were made. We, the creatures, rebel against our Creator. We desire to rule ourselves instead of to submit to His rule.

Now, as believers, our profession denies that we would think this way or behave this way. It remains to our spiritual growth via the grace of God to bring our hearts and minds into conformance to our profession. We must take on the task of actively searching out our thoughts and desires in order to root out the pride that is common to all men. Thus it behooves us to consider the many ways that pride can rear its ugly head in our lives.

Of course the most obvious expression of pride is boasting. Most of us know that this is prideful so we don't come outright and say boastful things, unless you are Donald Trump, I

suppose. Can we take satisfaction in doing something well? Perhaps if we take care and do so in moderation if we also turn that satisfaction into thanksgiving to God. In all that we say or do, may His glory be our motivation.

Pride also is revealed whenever we sin, when we disobey. Acts of disobedience explicitly assert, without words or conscious thoughts, that we rule ourselves. But the opposite side of this coin is false obedience, or doing the right thing out of a desire for praise, instead of out of love for God. Any obedience for the sake of claiming to be obedient is false obedience. "Bartering" with obedience is also prideful. We do not reach a point where we can claim to have obeyed enough, or that God owes us anything for some sort of obedience on our part. Also, there is no relative obedience, a strong temptation when called to do hard work. We are tempted to think, "I have done enough good things," or, "I have done more than other person. I shouldn't have to do any more."

And let us not forget substitute obedience, which King Saul is famous for. He was charged with destroying the excessively evil Amorites. God placed them all under the ban, along with all of their possessions and livestock, to rid the earth of their wickedness. They were to be cut off from the earth. Yet Saul did not obey, in that he spared the livestock. When Samuel the prophet approached, he asked Saul why he did not obey. "But I did obey," said Saul. Samuel replied, "Then what is this bleating of sheep that I hear?" To this Saul answered, "I kept the livestock to offer a sacrifice to God." We all do this very same thing, if, when we are told to do x, we disobey, rationalizing that some other good deed, y, is better. Samuel's reply to Saul condemns this action: "To obey is better than to sacrifice." We do not get to substitute what we prefer for what God commands. This is sanctification, not ordering a burger at In-N-Out. There is no animal style, just God's style, and disobedience cannot be masked by some other prideful good deed.

But still, let us not skip over the even more subtle forms of pride. How about, "I'm tired this morning, I think I'll stay home from church."? This is forsaking the fellowship by not availing oneself of opportunities to worship or study with the Body of Christ. When we are tempted to think, "I've heard it before, I don't really get anything out of ..." whatever the service or the study is, then we are acting pridefully. Implicit in such thoughts are the notions, "I already know that. That teacher is kind of boring. I am beyond needing that teaching or worship." Such attitudes are self-focused and not characterized by service to each other. These thoughts are not far from, "I have enough Jesus, I'm good for now, I'll just do my own thing." The humble approach is to receive whatever opportunities are presented. It is certainly understood that we all do have other responsibilities that cannot be neglected, and none of us have infinite physical energy either. Let us be on guard, however, that we often

take on responsibilities that prioritize everything else except for church or for serving each other. It is a challenge in our world to make life with the Body of Christ a priority, but this is, in fact, what we are called upon to do. To live with the Church at the center of one's life deals a direct blow to pride for it acknowledges through how we live, that God is truly king of our lives.

But wait... There are still more modes of pride. What about complaining? We all admit that there are times when issues need to be addressed. But we must be cautious that the issues are not simply a personal dislike or grievance. A complaint implicitly assumes that we know better than someone else. And we find out that when others change because of our complaints, that we have a sort of power that can become unintentionally intoxicating. Complaining tends to create more complaining. The bottom line is that we love to be right. It feels good to be indignant. It feeds our pride. In fact, I think that we actually love to be cut off in traffic because then we can really lay into our horns. "You cut me off! You are an awful driver! I've been wronged!" When we suffer injustice, great or small, then we get power, and we will pridefully wield that power completely oblivious to the sin that we are committing.

Finally, in this survey of some of the common forms of pride, I'd like to also mention the saddest one. I'm sure we have all heard someone say, "I've done too many bad things. Jesus can't forgive me." This is the saddest manifestation of pride. Some people do really feel too unworthy to receive Christ's forgiveness. At the same time, this can also simply be a cop out for refusing to submit to the grace of God. But in any case, be reassured today that Christ's grace is infinite. His love is unbounded. No sin is too big for Jesus to forgive, and as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. God promises to welcome all who will believe and repent and be baptized. He is God. He makes the rules. He loves us, and will always welcome a penitent sinner.

This is not a comprehensive list. Pride is insidious. Fallen man loves himself greatly, and that disproportionate self-love is not easily displaced. Unfortunately being overly aware of our progress in this area also leads to pride. "Look how well I've done at not sinning!" Oops boasting right there.

As we've mentioned a couple of times already, the remedy for pride is *not* to fixate on how prideful we are, but rather to humble ourselves before God. Humility is the virtue which trains us away from pride, which opposes pride. We see this emphasis in the epistle which begins, "be subject one to another." And then also, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God." Humility opposes pride; humility transforms the thoughts of our minds to match reality of the created order. We exist only by the love and grace of God. We are saved

only by the love and grace of God. Therefore, we have no grounds upon which we can boast either outwardly to others or inwardly in our minds. Humility is a forgetting of self, and filling our thoughts and imaginations with Jesus Christ. The prideful man is focused on himself. The humble man is focused on Jesus.

So what are practical ways to grow in humility? We can start with confession of sins. We are blessed with liturgies that always prompt us to confession, and always pronounce God's forgiveness. This is a constant reminder not only to keep short accounts with God, but also to remember we are completely dependent upon Him for our health, our being, and our redemption. We truly have nothing to boast about. Any sense of pride is self-deception. Our redemption and growth in godliness flow from the love God lavishes upon us. Persistent confession keeps this reality always at the front of our thoughts.

The obvious response to God's forgiveness is gratitude. In order to nurture humility in one's life, focus upon gratitude to God. Pride lies to us and tells us that we are the rulers of our lives. Gratitude tells us that everything we have is a gift from God, and therefore, He is the ruler, and we submit to Him and to each other in Him. We are completely dependent upon God, and gratitude nurtures this reality in us.

Besides frequent confession and lives characterized by gratitude, let us also be skeptical of our own motives as we make decisions and as we conduct our daily lives. We have been reminded today in the epistle that the devil prowls around seeking to destroy us, and he will gladly encourage our self-destruction in pride. But let us also remember the gospel lesson. Christ always seeks us out with intense diligence, to bring us into a deeper relationship with Him. There is joy in heaven over a sinner who repents. Perhaps this most directly applies to conversion, but let us not underestimate the daily conversions we need from our sinful pride. The heavenly host cheers us on as we grow closer to God!

Finally, we remember that Christ Himself is our pattern. God is transcendent above all creation, but He humbled Himself, taking on the form of a servant to save the creatures who rebelled against Him. God would not turn His back on the creation. God became man, humbling Himself and suffering for them to save them. This is the example of humility that we must strive towards. So may we learn to humble ourselves, not resentfully, but out of pure gratitude and devout love. May we learn to hate our pride and take up the challenge to fight against it. And may the vision of our loving Christ always fill our imaginations and increasingly deepen our love for Him.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.