**A Turtle on a Fence Post**

Once upon a time: a woman came home from a county fair with a monkey on a leash.

* Husband: *What the heck is that?*
* Wife: *It’s a monkey. Isn’t he cute? I won him at the fair!*
* Husband: *What are you going to do with it?*
* Wife: *I’m keeping him as a pet.*
* Husband, now a bit frustrated: *Where are we going to keep a monkey?*
* Wife, with a note of defiance: *He’ll sleep in our bedroom.*
* Husband, now somewhat angry: *What about the smell?*
* Wife: *I got used to you. I suspect he will too.*

Speaking of smells. There’s an old adage: *Self-praise smells bad*. Another way to say it: *Pride stinks*. The thing about pride is that there’s no way to clean it up. No matter how you dress it up, no matter how you present it, no matter how you disguise it, pride stinks.

Unlike cheese or wine, pride doesn’t grow better with age. Leave it untreated and over time it will taint everything. Have you ever come home to discover the smell of rotting potatoes? It takes over your house until you get rid of the source. That’s what pride is like, and that’s why the Bible says:

* *The Lord detests all the proud of heart*. Proverbs 16:5
* *The Lord hates proud eyes*. Proverbs 6:17

Unchecked, pride can lead to all kinds of trouble.

In 1986, in the Black Sea off the coast of Russia, two passenger liners collided killing hundreds of people. What really sticks about that collision is that the cause wasn’t some mechanical or electrical failure, nor was it foggy.

Both captains knew of the other’s presence. And they knew the other’s path. The cause of the crash was that neither captain was willing to yield to the other. Pride kept them from giving way to the other.

This was a sea-going game of chicken with real life consequences. By the time either of them decided to change course, it was too late. All those passenger who died, died because of pride.

While none of us are likely to cause hundreds of deaths, we struggle with pride, and pride stinks. It stinks because it interferes with our spiritual lives. Pride keeps us from really surrendering to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Over the past two sermons I’ve talked about how some people are significantly changed when they come to know Jesus while others are seemingly unchanged by the experience.

Last week I talked about how we can easily become complacent in our faith lives and stop really listening to God. Whether unchanged by Jesus or complacent in relationship with Him, the cause is pride. And pride stinks.

Pride reaches into areas of our lives that we often don’t even realize.

* Pride makes us think our sin isn’t all that bad.
* Pride causes us to ignore the teaching and warnings of the Bible.
* Pride leads us to put ourselves before others; even before God

Pride stinks.

One time Jesus had gone to the house of a prominent Pharisee for a Sabbath lunch. In case you’re new to the Bible, Pharisees were hyper-religious men who wanted everyone to know just how religious they were.

This Pharisee and his other guests were watching Jesus closely. There was a man at that luncheon who suffered from , or excessive swelling (it used to be called dropsy).

Maybe he was a plant to test Jesus, or maybe he was a friend of that Pharisee and his buddies. I doubt the later because they would have considered him unclean and would keep their distance. However he happened to be there, they were watching Jesus who they knew had a tendency to heal people, and they wouldn’t like it if He healed the man on the Sabbath.

While they were watching Him He was watching them. He had noticed how they chose their seats, each choosing according to desired social hierarchy. Each man tried to get the most important seat, like concert goers who stand in line for 48 hours for a front row place at a Rihanna concert.

Can’t you just picture it? A bunch of old guys rushing out of synagogue after worship, leaving the wives and kids behind, running to the Pharisee’s house to get the best seat. Can you smell the pride?

*When He* (Jesus) *noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, He told them this parable:*

*When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, “Give this man your seat.” Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.*

*But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, “Friend, move up to a better place.” Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.*

*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.* Luke 14:7-11

The men gathered for this dinner knew all about Jesus. They knew He was a teacher, respected by many people. They knew He taught stuff like, *Happy are the poor in spirit.* *Happy are those who mourn. Happy are the meek. Happy are those who are persecuted*.

But they were proud men. They didn’t believe the part about *whoever exalts himself will be humbled*, and probably neither do we.

* We choose what we believe are the best seats, either the prominent places, or places that protect us from being noticed.
* We like to be around important people and we drop names so our friends know we have important contacts.

The converse of pride is humility, but humility isn’t as attractive. Humility isn’t cowardice or self- loathing. It’s not weakness or inability. Humility is self-appraisal based on reality. Humility isn’t thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.

Humility comes from two things:

1. Indebtedness. What do you have that was not given to you? I know you work hard at your job, but didn’t God give you the ability to work? God gave you your talent.

If you’re successful in your career, isn’t your discipline and aptitude a gift from God? We are in debt to God for every good thing in life and since we are in debt to God how could we be proud?

1. A sense of need. If we compare ourselves to other sinful men, we may develop some pride. *I’m better than him!* But if we measure ourselves against a Holy and perfect God, we would have to admit an intense need for what only He can offer. We can’t do anything about our sin on our own. We need Jesus.

Our debt and our need of grace are the source of humility because they prove that we’re not better than anyone else. We’re all common folk.

Our English word common comes from a Latin word com-munis. Com-munis means “ready to serve.” If I ignore my debt and my need, I may become proud thinking I’m better than someone else. But if I recognize that I’m a common man just like everyone else, I am humbled and ready to serve.

Jesus’ advice to the Pharisees at this dinner was straight forward.

* If you take an important seat, you risk being embarrassed when the host asks you to give up your seat to someone more important. And since all the seats are taken, you’d be stuck at the last seat in the hall.
* It would be better for you to take a lowly seat and if the hosts thinks highly of you, he’ll come and get you and move you up to a better seat.

At another time Jesus told a story to emphasize humility in our relationship to God, recorded in Luke 18:

*Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men; robbers, evildoers, adulterers; or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”*

*But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, the sinner.”*

*I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* Luke 18:10-14

This story is carefully told. Every line emphasizes the contrast between one man’s self-righteous pride and the other’s humility. There’s nothing in the story to suggest that either man was insincere. Both had gone to the Temple where they believed prayers were most effective, not unlike people struggling with some issue that come to our sanctuary to pray.

You can just smell the pride of this Pharisee. In his own eyes, and probably in the eyes of the community, he was a virtuous man. He congratulated himself that he didn’t do the evil things other men did. *I don’t kill. I don’t rob. I’m not like that guy back there*. That made him feel good.

Measured against other men he probably was outstanding. It didn’t occur to him to measure himself against God.

King Louis XV of France was known as the Beloved. He prided himself on being a generous and benevolent ruler. Thomas Carlisle was a social commentator of that time. His book on the history of the French Revolution was the inspiration for Charles Dicken’s A Tale of Two Cities.

Carlisle conducted the funeral of Louis XV. He said this,

*Yes, poor Louis, death has found you. No palace walls or gorgeous tapestries could keep him out. Time is done and all the scaffolding of time falls destroyed and with terrible clatter around you. The pale kingdoms yawn. And there you must enter, naked, all un-kinged*.

What eloquent quoting Job, *Naked I came into this world, and naked I depart*. Job 1:21 The Pharisee was great in his own eyes not thinking that when he stands before God he will be “all un-Phariseed”.

He congratulated himself that he did all the right stuff, fasted twice a week, even though the Law only required fasting once each year, tithing everything, again greater than the Law required, but lacking was a sense of need. Who needs the Messiah when you’re that good?

David wrote in Psalm 51, *The sacrifice God wants of us is a broken and contrite heart*. Psalm 51:15. In a word, humility.

God wants His people to admit that we can’t be good enough on our own. We need Jesus.

In contrast to this Pharisee, another man is clearly a sinner. While Pharisees were the most pious and religious people in Jewish society, tax collectors were the most despicable. They were considered traitors to their people. He was a sinner, not just every day but all day.

This despicable traitor wouldn’t even approach the altar. He wouldn’t look up. He wouldn’t go near other worshipers. Instead he expressed deep remorse and grief over his sin, and he begged for mercy.

Something you don’t notice in the English text, he doesn’t call himself a sinner. He calls himself THE sinner, as if the sins of others were negligible by comparison. He knew he owed everything to God and he knew he needed the Messiah.

Jesus’ terse conclusion probably shocked His listeners: *I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God*. The tax collector was justified, the Pharisee was not. That would be like saying, a child molester is justified but Carl Savich is not.

It’s not that Jesus condoned his sins or that somehow his character was considered Godly. Nor does it suggest that he is no longer struggled with sin. It’s simply that this man was humble and trusted God’s grace rather than his own good works. (By the way, Carl isn’t justified because he’s such a fine example of Christian living. He too is justified by his faith.)

Like the first story Jesus ended with this same statement, *Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

If you hope to be exalted you should take this teaching seriously. Pride stinks, but true humility is as pleasant as a blooming lilac.

I have been observing people for a long time. Here are six reasons why pride stinks. They’re not strictly from the Bible so you can ignore them if you wish, but I’m confident they’re accurate.

1. Pride infects the spirit. Like the Pharisee in the second story or the men who ran to get the best seats at the dinner in the first, price gives us a spirit that seeks recognition and glory.

Preachers have to fight this. I want you to think my sermons are great. I have to be careful. A homiletics professor said, and I fully agree, *You can’t convince people that you’re wonderful and that Jesus is wonderful at the same time*.

1. Pride keeps us from knowing the truth about ourselves. When infected with pride you can’t see or hear your own evil.

Have you ever witnessed this: Someone says some cutting remark then apologizes, *I’m sorry. I guess I’m just too honest for my own good*. Oh, really? His pride allowed him to see the hurt his comment caused but he saw it as a consequence of his virtue, not a result of his meanness. That stinks.

1. Pride causes us to be dishonest about our own sin. Prideful people may talk about the evil of sin, but they cover up or even lie about their own. That stinks because if we can’t recognize our sin we won’t repent and be forgiven.
2. Pride causes us to seek glory in our sin. You hear this often enough in personal testimony. I’m not against personal testimonies. I think they’re wonderfully encouraging. But sometimes when a guy is sharing his story you get a sense of “*Hey everybody,* *look at me. I was really bad!*” in the confession. It’s like he’s more spiritual because he came from so far away.
3. Pride ruins relationships. It ruins our relationship with God and with other people.
4. Pride destroys those we love because it uses them to build ourselves up. Some parents harm their children by pushing them to greatness so they can prove they’re better than other parents. Some parents push a child into a vocation that they can brag about even if the child isn’t interested.

Pride is a façade. It’s not reality. It’s a false image of myself I design to make me feel better about myself - but pride will not allow me to humble myself before Almighty God.

So I have a couple of suggestions to help resist pride:

1. Be good at whatever you’re doing, be the best. Get good training, practice, apply what you know, but spare the rest of us the reminders of how honored we are to be in your presence. Be the best but don’t tell us.

Remember, everything we have we owe to our God. Remember also, no matter how good we are, there’s always someone who is better.

1. Walk closely with God – but don’t tell us about it. If you’re truly a man or woman of God, we’ll know. You don’t need to point it out to us.

One of the issues Jesus had with the Pharisees and other religious leaders of His day was that they had this sense of pride about how religious they were. They wanted special treatment, special seats, special recognition. They dressed to show their spirituality.

I thought about titling this sermon, *I’m twice as humble as you!* I think that irony would capture the nature of pride. Instead I chose, *A Turtle on a Fence Post*.

Think about it. If you see a turtle atop a fence post, you know someone helped him get there. He certainly didn’t crawl up there himself.

If you ever start to think too highly of yourself remember, you didn’t get where you are on your own and without help. Everything you are and everything you have is a gift from God. Humble yourself before Him.