

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 5 -

THE PARALYSIS OF PRIDE

"SELF-LOVE is that master-passion in every human heart. Let us give self-love the first place in the inventory and catalogue of our passions, because it has the largest place in all our hearts and lives . . . It is out of self-love that all our other evil passions spring. The whole fall and ruin and misery of our present human nature lies in this, that in every human being self-love has taken, in addition to its own place, the place of the love of GOD and of the love of man also. We naturally now love nothing and no one but ourselves. And as long as self-love is in the ascendant in our hearts, all the passions that are awakened in us by our self-love will be selfish with its selfishness, inhuman with its inhumanity, and ungodly with its ungodliness. And it is to kill and extirpate our so passionate self-love that is the end and aim of all GOD's dealings with us in this world . . ."

- Alexander Whyte.

"NO MAN CAN BEAR witness to CHRIST and to himself at the same time. No man can give the impression that he himself is clever and that CHRIST is mighty to save." These words suitably framed faced me in a vestry of a church in Scotland before entering the pulpit. They searched the heart in preparation for the sacred ministry about to begin. Ever since that day they have been found on the first page of my Bible, and indelibly stamped upon my conscience. It was Professor James Denney who sent forth these words to bring a salutary truth home to those who stand in the holy place. In the place of privilege is found our greatest peril.

The sin of Lucifer is not necessarily associated with those who are near to GOD, and yet it is in the traffic of holy things where it is unveiled. The Old Testament mirrors for us many characters struggling with this temptation, for it acts as a diseased patch in life to undo the service of the best. A servant of GOD may have the impulse to offer himself to minister, but if he is unable to become a channel of grace, this may be one of the explanations valid to experience. We see it illustrated in the life of Uzziah, King of Judah (II Chronicles 26). In the kingly office by a divine appointment this man failed by reason of pride.

Uzziah had been blessed by GOD and prospered during his reign. His armies were victorious in the field, Jerusalem was made strong and safe, and husbandry multiplied throughout the land. For fifty-two years he ruled in equity and honour. The tragedy of the story is that a lifetime of service was spoiled by one act, and the most powerful king of Judah died as a leper! It was GOD who made him to prosper (verses 5, 7), and he was marvellously helped (verse 15). This strong man failed in the hour of success and prosperity, and then it was **"his heart was lifted up to his**

destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God" (verse 16). Is it true that more men fall in prosperity than in adversity? Self-sufficiency means a static state of mind and a man's boasted strength is weakness.

The poor man failed to realise that his power was imparted, not generated; given, not achieved. So long as he sought GOD he was strong (verse 5), but when he sought to disregard the will of GOD (verse 16) by intervening in the priest's office, he lost his power and position. GOD is no respecter of persons, and Uzziah was cast out of the Temple and cut off from any further usefulness. Such is this insidious peril of pride - malignant, subtle, unbridled, and presumptuous. When success makes a servant of GOD condescending and arrogant or despotic, he falls through self-will. The true strength of the godly life lies in humility before GOD and man. But the king was ensnared by popularity and the spirit of the age (verse 8, 15). So does pride come to grief by its slow paralysis.

When the mind is turned in upon itself to imagine great things of itself, it is "an easy target for swift temptation." Uzziah was easily provoked (verse 19), and refused to bear correction by those who were God-appointed. In his anger he refused to heed the messages of GOD as they pointed out his transgression of the priest's office and the dishonour it would bring him. Truly, **"the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride"** (Proverbs 14:3), a man's speech betraying him at this point. And nothing is more deceptive than pride of heart (cf. Obadiah 3). Spiritual pride is most noxious, and that haughty spirit of aloofness which refuses wise correction in love is doomed to destruction.

When a man's spirit is thus ruled, the sharp punishment of GOD is nigh. **"The leprosy even rose up in his forehead..."** and Uzziah **"hasted also to go out"** (of the Temple - verses 19-20). Pride is often associated with a certain swelling of the head. Significantly, the diseased patch was localized here. Uzziah who kept company with an Isaiah and Zechariah was brought low in judgment through **"the pride of life"** (1 John 2:16). Because it is not of the Father, it well merits this rebuke. How far removed it is from **"this mind... which was also in CHRIST JESUS"** (Philippians 2:5-9). Whatever the form of pride thus disclosed, its essence is an intellectual spirit which sets itself up against GOD.

Alas! for the poor King. He whose reign opened in glorious hope and was sustained by the blessing of GOD undid in a moment the work of years. He never humbled himself before GOD in the hour of temptation, and the paralysis overtook him. The leprous life went to its inevitable end.

The solemn task of self-examination is never easy, but is always necessary. The man of GOD is not exempt from this bewitchery of pride. From the moment of his dedication to the holiest and highest of all works, throughout the years of his devoted service and until the completion of his ministry, he will be beset continually to yield to pride. For one thing, a Christian worker lives in the glare of publicity which may well dazzle him. Here he is met with the adulation of the world, the foolish, and the well-meaning, who, each in turn, bring their contribution to feed the fire of self-admiration and esteem. It is right that we see ourselves in relation to this peril.

Of the many deadly sins, the theologians have reckoned this to be the worst. Augustine held it to be the deadliest of all. He believed that obstinate pride was the unpardonable sin itself. Dante

spoke of it in his Divine Comedy, and the Apostle Paul has shown the better way of love, which **"vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up"** (I Corinthians 13). Our Lord has vividly portrayed the selfsame spirit in the Pharisee who prayed with himself in the Temple, and in contrast pointed to the publican who humbly smote his breast. Pride creates barriers of class, sect, family, and peoples. It is paralyzing and deceiving, because it impinges on the things which are good and right and legitimate. Good things of life are heightened in mind, and, distorted out of perspective, lead us to condemning pride.

The minister is the prey of pride because he traffics in holy things and is in danger of familiarity with sacred elements of truth and life. Pride goes with us frequently to our studies and there sits with us and does our work, chooses our subject and words and ornaments, and even accompanies us into the pulpit. The insidious peril of pride is that "it persuadeth us to paint the window, that it may dim the light." The sermon should be the best possible expression in language and style, but pride opens the way for too many flowers and the hiding of the Cross. The tendency to spiritual superiority is present. There is a pride of attainment and achievement in the spiritual life which might easily lead us to forget the secret of strength. The grace of humility better fits the servant of GOD.

Years ago, Edinburgh was shocked by the disgrace and imprisonment of one of her prominent citizens. In his vestry the next Sunday morning, Dr. Alexander Whyte heard the church bells ringing, and he turned to his assistant minister and said, "Do you hear those bells? He hears them in his prison cell this morning. Man, it might have been me." It was the Dr. Whyte who was an example of the grace of GOD in humility that with the crucifixion of pride he could speak of having met the greatest sinner in the city, namely, himself. Doubtless, we acknowledge a good honest pride, what Milton calls a modest pride, as proper to our human make-up. We alone judge that spirit which makes men hard against their own flesh and blood and against GOD. The Bible has much to say about it, from the story of our first parents, through Cain, the history of Israel, to the temptation of our Lord. The truth of it is seen not only in the Bible but in great literature, for it is grounded in human nature as well as in Biblical literature. Pride is a root of sins. John Bunyan discerned its evil by speaking of Mister Heady, and Mister High-mind, also Mister Loth-to-stoop.

That master of the heart, Thomas Goodwin, knew this snare at the University. Though preserved from gross immorality he was living for himself, laying up stores of information for his own glory. In youth he laboured that he might obtain high preferment in coming years, and was especially ambitious of becoming an eloquent and popular, rather than an evangelical and useful, preacher. He was never unfaithful to his religious convictions, but they became feeble in his fond endeavour to obtain literary distinction and professional eminence (cf. Memoirs).

Goodwin's pride shewed itself in his love for fine sermons, and the desire to preach them he regarded as his easily besetting sin, of which he had to repent before GOD. As soon as he was taught by the grace of GOD to "mortify his master-lust," his love of applause, he was never so much as tempted to put in any of his own withered bowers which he had gathered. His master-lust was no immoral propensity as men regard immorality but a desire to obtain distinction and honour by eloquent preaching. By his conversion and spiritual experience of grace, Goodwin at last could say:

"I freely renounced for CHRIST, when GOD converted me, all those designs of pride, and vain glory, and advancement of myself, upon which my heart was so strongly set that no persuasion of men, nor any worldly considerations, could have diverted me from the pursuit of them. No, it was the power of GOD alone that prevailed to make me do it. It was He alone made me willing to live in the meanest and most afflicted condition, so that I might serve Him in all godly sincerity. I cheerfully parted with all for CHRIST, and He hath made me abundant compensation, not only in the comforts and joys of His love, which are beyond comparison above all other things, but even in this world. What love and esteem I have had among good men, He gave me. He alone made my ministry in the Gospel acceptable, and blessed it with success, to the conversion and spiritual good and comfort of many souls."

The centuries pass and preachers to-day can be proud of their sermons and preaching rather than declaring the whole counsel of GOD. In this realm of preparing the messages from week to week we need grace, lest we fall into this pitfall. The late Dr. A. T. Pierson had to trim his life in this regard. On November 12, 1875, he was convinced that the great obstacle to his spiritual growth and power was his ambition for literary glory. This conviction had been slowly growing, but he had almost unconsciously fought against it. Now he asked GOD to deal with this ambition in His own way.

"I saw [he said] that my life had been full of self-seeking and idolatry, such as I had never realized . . . From that day I was conscious of the presence of the HOLY SPIRIT in my life and work in a way that I had before never known. I saw that all the glory was to be His, not mine . . . From that hour I nailed my ambition for literary honours and applause to the Cross of CHRIST."

Pomp and pride do not befit the ministerial office. Yet we are tempted to vanity and to display our gifts. The temptation to shine, according to Dr. David Christie, in *The Service of CHRIST*, will be ours. The pulpit is a unique place and there we stand between GOD and men. How tragic if the Cross cannot be seen for the flowers of our adornment. What if our paltry self intrudes in speech and in manner until the hungry are not fed and the disciples miss the vision of the Lord? Sometimes the flattery and admiration of a few will feed our vanity until we are lifted up in pride to our destruction and become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. We need to pray for naturalness controlled by the Spirit of GOD and a wise self-forgetfulness in our ministrations.

In our pastoral office we must not lord it over the flock. An unsanctified pride of office is nowhere more repulsive than in a Christian minister. Yet, by virtue of his post and vocation, a measure of dignity invests his counsel in spiritual affairs. But he must beware of pride of office: "I'm the minister" - yes! and we are also men among men, needing the same grace of GOD. Apollos could be taught by Aquilla and Priscilla at Ephesus (Acts 18:26). The scholar and eloquent preacher was instructed in spiritual deeps by two humble people of plain craft. In our visitation we shall discover that we have much to learn of the grace of GOD in suffering - patience, of spiritual insight, and of large faith. Benedictions will rest upon a pastor, who, without pride of office, humbly "sits where others sit."

The swelled head that we speak of is a malady of youth, but it has been known to attack the mature and even the venerable. That excellent and once popular causeur, Claudius Clear, wrote a letter in which he drew attention to this infection. Its manifestation is noted in the pride of the man who seeks seclusion from the vulgar herd. You do not make contact with the great one except through many intermediaries. One of the signs is that of "pose or what is called side."

Your friend does not cut you, indeed he is willing to have speech with you, but there is "unwonted majesty in his accent," and other signs in his voice that relations between you are unmistakably changed: Of course, there is the genial form that adds to the gaiety of life in the swagger and bragging, sheer and unadulterated. Such a "one will talk about nothing but himself, the compliments paid him, allusions in the papers, his magnetic influence over others, and so on." But the most dangerous form of the trouble is to be pointed out: "The exalted being imagines himself above an rules. He is emancipated." He can discard engagements at will and become careless about clock or calendar. The calling of the man of GOD is the most exacting of all lives, and the grace of humility is the one disposition to be sought after, lest we slip.

Any "self-review" of one's life will bring to light the odiousness and danger of this sin of pride. We are prone to vain-glory, hungering for the applause of men. And the spirit which hates and heaps opprobrium upon others is never far away. In Thomas Shepard (1605-49), Pilgrim Father and Founder of Harvard, his diary reveals the abhorring of himself:

"One midnight well on toward the end of his life, he was found lying on his face in his study, with a copy of The New England Gazette crushed together in his lockfast hands. The reason was afterwards discovered. Mister T. H., Thomas Shepard's bosom friend, was wont to have a sermon printed in the Gazette time about with a sermon of Shepard's and both the manager of the journal and all its readers were well known to Shepard to put his friend's sermons far above his for their eloquence and for their English . . . Shepard made no secret to GOD, and to his own soul how he took it. For the copy of the paper that Shepard had crushed in his hands that midnight contained a specially beautiful sermon of Mister T. H's. And as Shepard tried first not to see that sermon, and then turned in prayer to try and read it, and could not, he quite lost all power over himself and actually fell on his face on the floor as if his New England study had been the Garden of Gethsemane."

In his diary, under the date November 10, 1642, Shepard wrote: "I kept a private fast for light to see the full glory of the Gospel . . . and for the conquest of all my remaining pride of heart." We must seek for the grace that raises us above such a spirit of vanity, lest our minds become like buckets without bottoms, devoid of spiritual understanding.

Jane Austen, in her *Pride and Prejudice*, speaks of a certain clergyman as a mixture of pride and humility. But that is impossible, for the latter would have cast out the former. By humility she evidently meant servility. Humility is neither servile nor forbidding. But humility to offset pride needs cultivating in the School of Calvary.

There we find its beauty in contemplating the love and majesty of GOD in the face of our Saviour. Only humility's flower and print are seen in Him, who was never loftier in spirit than when He girded Himself and washed the feet of His disciples. That act was perfectly natural to Him. He who said, "**I am meek and lowly in heart**," revealed His greatness by His voluntary stooping in life and death. If we are to be like Him we must shun the feeling of superiority over our fellows, and, in love, serve. We shall be ready to stoop to their help and bow in the presence of goodness, without exaggerating our own importance, for GOD can do without us. "He buries His workmen, but carries on His work," said John Wesley. Only a genuine zeal for the glory of GOD and a passion for the winning of men to the mastery of JESUS CHRIST will suffice to keep a minister from this paralysis which disrupts the spiritual life.

HUMILITY

Teach me, O CHRIST,
Thy full humility:
May I be glad in the gifts
Thou hast given,
Desiring no more:
May I deny myself:
May I believe in men,
Till by power of faith
In their better selves
I help to make them what
Thou would'st have them to be.
Teach me, O CHRIST, these
Thy great lessons, and hard:
Thine own humility,
Thine own simplicity.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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