

Pride's Subtle Masks By: Vickie Kraft

When Helen showed up for her appointment, she was quick to tell me she was both hurt and angry. Very angry. Her first words to me were, "How could children raised in our home, born into the fine family background we came from, have done this to us?"

Helen was well-manicured, nicely dressed, and held a respected place in the community. The firm set of her mouth and the regal arch of her eyebrows as she sat opposite me reflected tremendous pride. Not only was she proud of her family heritage, she also felt that she and her husband had done an excellent job of raising their children.

But Helen's children had chosen a lifestyle that horrified their parents—besides the tattoos and multiple earrings, a punk-rock band was headquartered in her sons' apartment, and she'd heard from the neighbors that girls had been seen coming and going at all hours. Helen refused to even entertain thoughts of drug or alcohol use—it was beyond her imagination that the story could get any worse than it already was.

Helen was deeply ashamed of the way her two boys had turned out. Her sense of worth had been wrapped up in raising children that were successful, according to *her* definition of success. If her boys had turned out the way she'd wanted them to, she would have felt affirmed as a mother and very proud of herself. Most likely she would also have quietly and condescendingly looked down on parents whose kids hadn't turned out quite as well as hers. Now she had no choice but to feel foolish, rejected, and angry.

Isn't this kind of emotional reaction a temptation for all of us?

A Sense of Accomplishment

The truth is, some of the feelings of pride we experience aren't the least bit wrong or inappropriate. For example, how do you feel when . . .

- A dinner party you worked on for days turns out perfectly?
- Your child comes home with all A's on his or her report card?
- You get a merit raise at work?
- You move to a new, larger home?
- You are still able to get into your wedding dress on your twenty-fifth anniversary?
- Your children choose mates you approve of?
- You redecorate your living room and it looks great?

What is the feeling you have at these accomplishments?

Do you experience pleasure and a sense of satisfaction? Is it all right to feel that way? Here's the conclusion reached by Solomon, the wisest man, besides Jesus, who ever lived:

"Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God" (Eccles. 5:18-19).

Pride in Achievement

God wants us to take pleasure in our achievements. It's a gift from God to be able to work hard and see the tangible results of our efforts. God wants us to enjoy not only our accomplishments, but our work itself. In fact, it is gross ingratitude not to enjoy our work and what we accomplish through it. So what is the difference between this sense of satisfaction that contributes to a healthy self-esteem and the unhealthy pride that God hates?

Unhealthy pride, by definition, is an excessively high opinion of oneself. This results in a person's reputation, needs, desires, dignity, and public image being his or her main interest and concern, regardless of the effect on others.

Pleasure and satisfaction can slip over the edge and fall into pride when we think we are important or superior because of who we are, what we have, or what we have done. What happens when we fail to acknowledge that God is responsible for everything we are, have, and do in this life? A story in the Bible describes just such a scenario. It's a story about Uzziah, who was just sixteen when he became king of Judah. He was very successful in everything he did. We learn right away the reason for his success:

"He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father Amaziah had done. He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success" (2 Chron. 26:4-5).

Uzziah wanted to know God, and he put himself under the instruction of a prophet who taught him God's Word and God's ways. God responded by giving Uzziah success in every area of his life. He also gave him victory over Israel's ancient enemies, so that Uzziah became famous and very powerful.

Uzziah strengthened the defenses of Jerusalem. He improved grazing lands in the desert by building cisterns to catch the rainwater so that his livestock could flourish. He loved the soil and was an expert in agriculture. He had a well-trained, well-equipped army of 307,500 men to defend his country. "His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped until he became powerful" (2 Chron. 26:15).

God gave this godly king the power to win his battles. God gave him wealth in livestock and abundant harvests. God used Uzziah as evidence to His people as well as to the nations all around that when a person worshiped the living God and obeyed His Word, he would be blessed in every way. But little by little, something happened to Uzziah. 'After Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall" (2 Chron. 26:16).

Pride Exalts Self and Forgets God

Uzziah's head had swelled with success. He somehow came to believe that his success was the result of his own ability and power and that he was a superior person. He forgot that God was the One who had helped and blessed him all along. He decided it wasn't enough simply to be king; He would take the religious leadership as well.

"Uzziah . . . was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in" (2 Chron. 26:16b-18).

Uzziah was in direct defiance of God's specific instructions regarding the priesthood. Only descendants of Aaron could be priests and burn incense in the holy place. When Uzziah arrogantly walked into the temple with the censer in his hand, the high priest, with eighty others, blocked his way. Notice how Uzziah's act is described—"He was unfaithful to the Lord his God."

When he was rebuked, instead of repenting, he became infuriated and raged at the priests. Anger is often a symptom of pride that we display when our control is threatened and we can't have our own way. What would have happened in this situation if God had not intervened is anyone's guess!

"Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD'S temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the Lord had afflicted him" (2 Chron. 26:19-21).

Leprosy! And Uzziah didn't face a gradual case of the disease, but instantaneous symptoms that rendered him permanently unclean. He could never enter the temple again. He lived in quarantine until the day he died. Uzziah's son became co-regent with him and carried on the work of governing. Uzziah's power and glory were gone, and he was effectively king in name only. When he had decided he was a special person and the rules didn't apply to him, he had lost it all. The fact is, God hates pride. Eventually, He will humble the proud.

God was the One who had first exalted Uzziah, and God was the One who humbled him. Uzziah lost everything when he forgot that the reason for all his victory, power, and fame was obedience to God's Word and acknowledgment of His sovereignty.

Maybe you think God's punishment was too severe. But Jesus said, "TO whom much is given, from him much will be required."¹⁶ The punishment for those in leadership is usually much harsher because of their example and influence. "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom" (Prov. 11:2). "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

Many years later, a proud pagan king learned the same lesson and expressed it well:

"Now, I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (Dan. 4:37).

Pride Takes Credit For Prosperity

When we take all the credit for our accomplishments and forget that God is the One who has given us our ability, that's the kind of pride God hates. Think about it: Who gave you your intellectual capacity? If you graduated with honors, it's true that you worked hard, but another student may have worked even harder and not made it. Why? Different IQs.

Who gave you your physical makeup? If you have never had to struggle with keeping your weight down because you have "thin genes," do you think you're superior to the person who fights with fat every day of her life?

Who gave you the ability to make money and invest it well? Perhaps you have the Midas touch and it seems so easy. Do you look down on people who live from paycheck to paycheck even though they practice every economy?

Who gave you your personality? If you're an extrovert, do you think you're better than a shy, retiring person? Who gave you creativity and artistic ability? You can see ways to put flowers or words or musical notes together to create things of beauty. Others can't even figure out how you do it. Does that make you superior?

Who gave you the skills that have made you successful in your job or profession? Sure, you've been diligent. You've taken courses, sharpened your skills—but others have tried just as hard and not made the grade.

"Who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Cor 4:7).

Do you get the point? God claims the credit for creating us and for the blessings He showers on us. He wants us to give Him the glory and thank Him. That will keep us from the kind of pride and self-sufficiency that becomes a stench in His nostrils. "The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished" ([Prov. 16:5](#)).

Satan's Proud Fall

Are you aware that pride was Satan's original sin? Here's how the prophet Isaiah described the great angel's fall: "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High' But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit" ([Isa. 14:12-15](#)).

It wasn't enough for Lucifer to be the highest-ranking cherub, filled with beauty and wisdom. He aspired to be like God, and that's exactly the bait he used to tempt Adam and Eve. He dangled the

forbidden fruit before their eyes and said God didn't want them to eat it because then "they would be like God."

Pride and independence from God made our first parents sinners, and that prideful nature was passed on to the whole race. Do you see why God hates pride? It's the fertile ground for all other sins to flourish. We see this in the New Testament as well when Paul predicted what the last days before the Lord's return will be like. Listen and see if this doesn't sound like it could describe the subjects of the stories on today's ten o'clock news:

"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them" (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

Notice that the list starts with "lovers of themselves." That's a good overall definition of pride. Then there are other words: "boastful," "proud," "conceited." The Holy Spirit, who is the Author of Scripture, wants us to have a clear picture of what pride looks like, internally and externally. Look at the terrible emotions, attitudes, and conduct it produces: abusiveness, disobedience, ungratefulness, unholiness, without love, brutality, and so forth.

A teenager hires other teenagers to kill her parents. Newborn babies are left in a dumpster.

A father sitting down with his family for a hamburger in a mall is killed before their eyes by a wild bullet because some gang members had a disagreement.

A bus driver is shot because a teenager objects to a seventy-five-cent fare.

Men, women, and children are killed in their homes and on the streets by drive-by shootings.

A maniac with a gun and a grievance mows down innocent people in a restaurant, a post office, and even a school.

Federal law permits and protects the slaughter of millions of unborn infants each year.

Sexual predators are viewed as needy people with a natural, unsatisfied hunger, not as sinners.

What more evidence do we need to prove that we are living in a culture that has forgotten God and His moral laws and exalted man? This kind of reprobation is the ultimate result of pride in the human heart. No wonder God hates it! James and Peter both quote Proverbs 3:34 to stress this point: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."¹⁷

When we read those indicting words in 1 Timothy, we are compelled to examine our hearts to see if any vestige of pride lurks there. How can we test ourselves so we can be honest and deal with this sin where we find it? Here are four key questions we should ask ourselves:

- Am I in competition with others?
- Do I feel I have to be self-sufficient?
- Do I struggle with my self-image?
- Do I choose my friends for their appearance, position, or performance?

Let's take a closer look at each of these questions.

Am I in Competition with Others?

There's nothing wrong with wanting to do our best. But problems arise when we compare ourselves to others. Is she a better teacher than I am? Do I get a better salary? Is my home more expensive and attractive? Is my marriage happier? Are my children more obedient or successful? When our sense of worth and our evaluations of others are dependent on comparison and competition, pride is at the root.

"If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load" ([Gal. 6:3-5](#)).

Do I Feel I Have to Be Self-Sufficient?

When we have a problem, some of us share a basic misconception that we don't need anyone and we can make it alone. That's nothing but pride! God never intended for people to function that way. He especially never intended this for His redeemed people—His family!

It takes humility to let down our guard and ask for counsel. Or to allow others to help us out of a financial crisis. Or to accept help with meals in times of illness. We are all members of one body, and each part is essential and interdependent on others. If we believe this, it will help to cure us of pride.

Do I Struggle with My Self-Image?

When we criticize someone else, is it an attempt to put ourselves in a superior position because we have concerns about our own inadequacy? Do we find ourselves boasting about ourselves? Pride is often a cover-up for insecurity. And a feeling of inferiority is often pride in reverse (more about that in the next chapter).

Do I Choose My Friends for Their Appearance, Position, or Performance?

If we only want to be friends with people who are in our tax bracket and we make no effort to associate with those in more humble positions and occupations, that is pride. God simply forbids it for

a believer. As Paul said, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited" ([Rom. 12:16](#)).

Paul wasn't the only one to speak out against pride. James also made some caustic remarks about snobbery.¹⁸

Overcoming Pride

You may have identified with some of the questions I've asked here. We all have to keep close watch on our attitudes. If we don't recognize that pride is a constant temptation and repent of it, we will not go on to spiritual maturity to the measure God wants for us. Here are some practical suggestions for how we can control this problem:

Don't Compare Yourself to Others

Don't compare yourself with other people or put one person into competition with another, evaluating their worth based on some standard you have selected. "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" ([2 Cor. 10:12](#)).

God wants us to accept people as they are, with all their good qualities as well as their less-attractive ones. Accept yourself the same way. Then when you see others succeed, you can be proud of them in an unselfish way. That's how Paul felt about the Corinthians, and he told them so, saying, "I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you" ([2 Cor. 7:4](#)).

Can you imagine the difference it would make with our husbands, children, and friends if instead of criticizing them we told them we were proud of them? We'd help them develop a healthy self-image instead of continuously trying to build up ourselves.

Desire God's Will More Than Your Own

The proud person wants to be in control. That's why obedience to this verse is a sure cure for pride. Submission to God doesn't leave much room for personal arrogance.

"And what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" ([Mic. 6:8](#)).

Learn to pray in humility, "Lord, I want Your will more than my own way. If You want me to be rich, influential, or famous, I'll trust You. But if You want me to simply walk with You in faithfulness and obscurity, I'll trust You to use me wherever You place me. All I want is Your will for my life." Humility with God forces us to be humble with one another.

Accept God's Unconditional Love

God wants us to have a balanced, healthy self-image because we believe two things. First, we believe He created us to be image-bearers of God. Second, we believe He loves us so much that He gave His own Son to save us and reconcile us to Himself.

Every person who has trusted in Jesus Christ is a child of God. We don't have to earn His love by our own efforts. God doesn't love us because we are lovable but because it's His nature to love. He just loves us as we are. If we really believe this, we will have a healthy, balanced self-image that comes from humility, not from pride.

Develop the Quality of Humility

"Humility is defined as a modest sense of one's own importance. It includes a courteous nature and a deep respect for the dignity of all humans."¹⁹

Jesus is our greatest example. He left the glories of heaven to come to earth and live life as a human being for thirty-three years. He humbled Himself to die a criminal's death on the cross for our salvation. And He invites us to come to Him and learn from Him: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29).

Jesus will give us rest from the burden of preoccupation with ourselves, our self-image, our reputation, our feelings of superiority or inferiority. He will teach us to be gentle and humble—to have a realistic evaluation of ourselves and to be grateful for who we are and where we are. His Spirit will cultivate these qualities in us as we give up our pride and independence and come to Jesus for deliverance and rest.

If you have never put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to save you, wouldn't today be a great time to begin a new life—life as a forgiven child of God? It takes humility to confess that you are a sinner and can't earn God's favor. Don't let pride keep you from a relationship with God.

Jeremiah sums it up well: "This is what the LORD says: 'Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight'" (Jer. 9:23-24).

¹⁶ Luke 12:48 NKJV.

¹⁷ See James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5.

¹⁸ See James 2:1-9.

¹⁹ Carter, *Mind Over Emotions*, 145.