

BECOMING CHILDISH
Psalm 131

When Laurie and I were newly married and had planted a fledgling church I knew very little about being a pastor. One resource that was available to me was a monthly meeting of all the pastors in the San Diego area from the denomination we were a part of. This usually involved getting together with 5 to 10 other pastors initially, though it grew larger later. After about the first year I began to sort of dread these meetings. I continued to go out of a sense of obligation, but I usually did not enjoy them and I did not find them helpful.

They weren't all bad. I met some men that I respect to this day and enjoyed spending time with. The meetings were intended to be a time of encouragement, support and sometimes learning and insight. Sadly they mostly didn't work that way for me. The problem with them was embodied by one particular man. He was highly intelligent, a natural leader, witty, charismatic, highly knowledgeable and very gifted. The meetings slowly began to turn into his show. He would talk a lot about what was going on at his church and about their undeniable success. He would expound at length on his views of every subject as though it was the final word. More and more he dominated the meetings.

I would come away from the meetings discouraged, depressed and more than a little uneasy. Those feelings were ill-defined for quite a while. I just knew that I didn't come away uplifted and encouraged and I most certainly did not look forward to the meetings. As time went by I realized I needed to understand what was going on with me. Slowly I figured out that the meetings seemed to push me into comparing myself and my ministry with this guy and his ministry. He came off as more knowledgeable than me, smarter than me, wittier than me, more sure of himself than me, more gifted than me and more successful in ministry than me. I was willing to accept that this was just my problem and that I needed to grow up and put on my big boy pants. However, as I tuned in more and more to what was going on it appeared to me that I wasn't the only one. It seemed that others in that group were also affected and were subtly drawn into competition. They weren't overt about it, but it seemed they were subtly trying to prove that they were as good as he was. That was why I would feel uneasy. This wasn't the way things ought to be when people who are leading in the church of Jesus Christ gathered. There was just something off about it.

Unfortunately I have heard and read comments by other pastors that suggest my experience is not unusual. Does that same kind of thing happen in other contexts in our world? I don't even need to answer that question. We all know it does. Everywhere you go you encounter people playing the one-upmanship game. What an awful game it is. Psalm 131 maps out for us an entirely different route to follow as we travel through this world. It is a radically different route indeed.

WHAT WE NEED: A HEART THAT IS NOT PROUD

The Psalm opens with the statement, “**My heart is not proud, O Lord.**” The writer clearly means it is a good thing to not have a proud heart. But is it always bad to be proud? While exercising recently I was also watching television and caught little of a show called *Restaurant Impossible*. This is a reality show in which they send a crew headed by Chef Robert Irvine to a failing restaurant to see if they can turn it around in the space of two days. In this episode the establishment in question was, of all things, a Mexican restaurant in New Hampshire. The employees of the failing restaurant clearly were not doing their best and didn't seem to care that the service was poor, the food was bad and the facility was a mess. After taking a hard look at what was going on Chef Irvine met with the staff. As he bluntly identified the deficiencies of their work they displayed obvious shame. They were not proud of their own efforts nor of the results. He then laid out a plan for changing and talked to them about what the restaurant could be and what it would require of them. They all enthusiastically agreed to the plan. They wanted to do better, they wanted to excel, and they wanted the restaurant to look good. In short, they wanted to be proud of their work and their product.

Is that bad? It would seem to be a good thing. That's not what the Psalmist was writing about. God always wants us to give our best and to be satisfied in knowing that we have done a good job. That's a good sort of pride. But there's a narrow line between that and the common pride of the human heart that is a negative thing spiritually. If the staff of the restaurant believed they were better than other people because they worked hard and had a better product than someone else, then that would be the wrong kind of pride. If they believed they were people of worth simply because they did a good job, that would be the wrong kind of pride. But the good kind of pride is the pride that says it has done the best it could possibly do and has done the job well.

But what about the bad kind of pride? What is that? There are two glimpses of it in the next few lines of the Psalm. First the Psalm says, “**my eyes are not haughty.**” The *New Century* translation of the Bible words this, “I don't look down on

others.” That’s a loose translation, but it gives a pretty good idea of what the author meant. The pride he has in mind wants to prove that it is somehow better, more worthy than other people. It compares, always with a desire to find that it is better than others. It wants to be able to look down on them. So this pride impacts our relationships with other people.

Then the Psalmist goes on to say, “**I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.**” That sounds like he is limiting himself to the mundane things of the world. He doesn’t want to expand knowledge or ask questions about the mysteries of life. You might easily conclude that he’s ruling out scientific inquiry because we are trying to peer into things that are “too great” or “too wonderful” for us. Is that what he means?

No, trying to understand the world is fine. However, the Psalmist here is admitting that there are things above his pay grade. He is saying God really does act in mysterious ways and that he doesn’t have to explain himself to any human. He is acknowledging that God is beyond his comprehension. He doesn’t insist that he be able to understand why God does what he does and demand an explanation.

Job was a man of great faith and character. But he wasn’t perfect. He went through a series of tragedies that would break a lesser man. But Job hung in there and kept his faith in God. However, during his arguments with his very unhelpful “friends” he began to question God. He felt he had been treated unfairly and he began to demand that God explain himself. In the end God shows up and asks, “So, Job, am I to understand that you are the creator of all things? You know all things? Are you the one who holds all things together and who understands everything? Are you the ultimate judge of all, so that everyone, me included, answers to you?”

In Job 42:3 Job says, “**Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.**” That’s what the Psalmist was referring to. God knows all things and does what is right. He doesn’t answer to us. When terrible disasters befall us like they did with Job, God does not have to explain himself or reveal his whole plan to us. There are things about why God does what he does that we simply don’t know. We are not here to grasp all of God’s ways. We are to accept them, even when we don’t understand. So in Job 42:6 he says, “**Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.**” That’s an ancient way of saying, “Oops. My bad.” Job had come to the place where, like the Psalmist, he said, “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too wonderful for me.”

The Psalmist was saying that pride also impacts how we relate to God. We can try to put ourselves in God's place. Job started to slip into that error. The Psalmist said, "I'm not God. I know it, accept it, and don't ever demand that he explain himself to me. I submit to his will and wisdom no matter what that means."

It is easy to sort of gloss over this and say, "Oh, yes, the kind of pride he's talking about isn't good." But this is a hugely important matter. The great scholar, C. S. Lewis wrote in his classic *Mere Christianity*, "The essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind."

It is not uncommon to hear pastors decry the rampant sexuality in our culture and the damage that it is doing. That's not wrong, but it may miss the point if what Lewis said was true. Pride is way, way worse. Sexual promiscuity is a fleabite and pride is terminal cancer according to Lewis. Pride is the complete anti-God state of mind. It is the thing that must exist before any other vice comes into being. Before there is promiscuity there is pride. It is the source. If pride does not exist first, neither do any of those other sins. That is because in our pride we say, "I know what is good for me and what is right better than God does." That pride must exist before we involve ourselves in any other sin or vice.

Did Lewis overstate his case? It certainly would not appear so in the Bible. In Psalm 101:5 God says, "**whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure.**" Proverbs 16:5 says, "**The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: they will not go unpunished.**" In both James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 we can read, "**God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.**"

God detests the proud. What do you detest? That's a powerful word. The dictionary gives as synonyms, "abhor, loathe, despise." For our anniversary recently Laurie and I got away for a couple of days. One warm evening we went out to a restaurant specifically because we could sit outside and enjoy the evening. It was a new Mexican restaurant, at least new for us, so I stayed away from certain dishes because at an unknown Mexican restaurant you never know when they might try to sneak some cilantro into a dish. I picked an entrée that I felt would be safe from the contaminating stuff. When it arrived it looked yummy. No cilantro in sight. We gave thanks for the food then dug in. My first bite I almost gagged. There was a sauce on one of my dishes that tasted like liquefied cilantro. It was

overwhelming. I loathe cilantro. I abhor it. I cannot abide it. I spit it out of my mouth. And that's how the Bible says God feels about our pride.

Why does God react so negatively and strongly to our pride? We've already seen that the Psalmist identified the fact that pride has impact in two ways, vertically and horizontally. It profoundly impacts in a negative way how we relate to God and how we relate to other people. Here are 3 truths that are absolutely central to relating to God:

- All that exists, including my life, is about God, not about me
- I am unacceptable to God on my own merit
- I am therefore totally dependent on God's mercy and grace that are given to me in Jesus Christ.

Human pride denies all of those. It wants to believe that my life is about me. In fact, the idea that life might be about God not me and my interests and my well-being is almost inconceivable to me in my natural state. Pride also wants to believe that I'm not so bad, in fact I'm pretty good. And it doesn't want to have to admit to being hopeless and helpless without God's grace. The simple reality is that we can never be in right relationship to God as long as we are proud. C. S. Lewis said, "As long as you are proud you cannot know God."

Jesus began the Sermon On The Mount with the words "**blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**" (Matthew 5:3). The work of Jesus begins with us seeing and admitting the poverty of our soul. If we don't think we need a Savior we're never going to accept one. If we don't think we need grace we will never experience it. The starting point of the gospel is humility. It begins with admitting that we are unworthy, needy and helpless.

The other aspect of pride that we don't like to admit is that it drives a wedge between us and other people. 1 Corinthians 13:4 says, "**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.**" Love is not proud. You can love or you can be proud. You cannot do both. It's one or the other. Why is this true? Again I will quote Lewis. "Each person's pride is in competition with everyone else's pride...Pride is essentially competitive." Pride is all about comparing and competing. It is at its core about being on top, being better. So Lewis sums up, "Pride always means enmity."

Pride is toxic. It is like some kind of hot radioactive waste. Would you want that in your home? Would you want your family exposed to it? It's the kind of stuff that

should make us want to put on hazmat suits, store it in some lead lined container then bury it in some vault way out in the desert where it can never come into contact with anything again.

HOW WE GET HUMILITY: A SOUL THAT IS AT REST

Look at what the Psalmist said in verses 2-3. **"I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me."**

The Psalmist acted. He *chose* to still and quiet his soul. He became like a weaned child. What did he mean? Have you been around an infant when that baby is hungry and wants to nurse? Would you say that generally babies are the epitome of patience, peace and propriety when they are hungry? Do they calmly say, "Mommy dear, I am quite hungry. Might I have a little milk please? If it's not too much trouble, of course." No, they start with some squawks and some fussiness and if the milk isn't produced in short order the storm builds in intensity. In many cases it's not long before the precious little child is caterwauling so loudly it would disturb the dead. There is no peace for anyone in the same time zone.

In contrast envision the child who has been weaned and has been given solid food. This child is at peace, not demanding, not whining, not screaming and writhing in obvious agony because he or she is not getting the milk they must have right this minute. There is patience, there is an ability to actually be human. That's how the Psalmist depicted his own soul. He chose to quiet his soul like that.

But how does one get to such a place of peace? Verse 3 tells us. **"O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore."** All right, we're supposed to hope in the Lord. But what does that have to do with humility and not being proud? Look at Matthew 18:1. **"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'"** Surely when Jesus heard that question he must have said, "C'mon, Man!" That question is a dead giveaway. If they had asked something along the lines of "how can we most epitomize the character of the kingdom of heaven" that would have been a good question. Who is the "greatest" is a big time Uh Oh. We all know that any time you see an -est ending on a word you are ranking something. Biggest, fastest, strongest, richest, smartest, greatest, all mean there's a hierarchy. When the disciples talked about greatest they revealed they believed they were in a competition.

Look how Jesus responds in verses 2-4, **"He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever**

humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” They needed to change. What existed in their hearts was unacceptable because they were obsessed with pride and the desire to win the competition. Then he said, “Okay, you want to be declared greatest disciple in the kingdom? Here’s how you do it. Become like this little child.”

At this point some preachers wax eloquent about how we have to become trusting like a child, have a childlike faith, have the innocence of childhood and all manner of sentimental ideas. Would you read the book please? Jesus told us what he meant. He said “**whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest.**” This was not about childlike faith or innocence. It was about *humility*.

Our culture makes a big deal about children, though a lot of it is lip service. But even we view children as being in a humble position. They aren’t allowed to vote, to drive, to hold public office, to transact major financial deals, and so on. We don’t ask them to write opinion pieces in the editorial section or to give their opinion on Fox News shows or CNN’s shows. Yes, we love them and value them, but they have a place, and it’s not center stage. In Jesus’ day their place was even farther from the spotlight. Their ideas on things were not valued. Children weren’t even to be seen and not heard. They weren’t necessarily even to be seen.

Jesus said, “You want to be the greatest in the kingdom? Then be willing to be viewed like a kid. **Choose** to not care if no one wants your opinion or wants to put you in the spotlight or if no one even notices you.” Then Jesus amplified the message. In verses 5-6 he said, “**Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.**” At that point people tend to say, “Yes, we must protect the children.” Again, please read the book. Jesus wasn’t talking about literal children. He referred to “these little ones *who believe in me*.” He didn’t mean little in the sense of young and small, but little in the sense of humble. He meant the poor in spirit who will someday inherit the kingdom of God.

Now there is an interesting contrast in what Jesus said in verses 5-6. You can see that verse 6 begins with the word “but.” It is always good to pay attention to logical connections when interpreting the Bible. “But” is a word of contrast. Jesus is contrasting two alternatives in these verses. The first alternative is in verse 5, “**whoever welcomes a little child like this.**” To welcome a little child, a follower of Jesus, means to value him or her, to consider them important and affirm them.

The other alternative, the contrast, is oddly not to fail to welcome them or to exclude them. Rather, it is to “cause them to sin.” The expression “causes to sin” translates the Greek word *skandalizo*. We get our word “scandalize” from it. Sometimes it is translated as putting a stumbling block in someone’s way, and it can mean that. But it can also mean to “set a trap.” It is used this way in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Psalm 140:5, which says, “**Proud men have hidden a snare for me; they have spread out the cords of their net and have set traps for me along my path.**” Proud men have set traps for me. They have scandalized me.

How do proud men set traps for humble people? By being proud and luring them into the competition to be the greatest! Every time we try to prove something about ourselves, that we are significant, that we are successful, intelligent, talented, attractive, powerful, wealthy, accomplished, knowledgeable, we are setting a trap for other people. We are comparing, we have entered the competition. We are saying to them, “I’m somebody,” and luring them in to try to do the same thing. We are almost forcing them to prove that they also are significant, valuable and important. We have incited pride in them!

Jesus said you have the choice between being preoccupied with your own esteem, worth, significance and trying to prove it, thereby setting a trap for others as one alternative, and being taken out into the middle of the Pacific Ocean, having heavy chains wrapped around your neck and thrown into the sea as the other alternative. When faced with that choice, he said, take being deep sixed. You’re much better off drowning at the bottom of the ocean than you are letting your pride draw other people into the competition, thus causing them to sin by being proud too.

In his book, *Risking Faith* (p. 188), Dr. Steve Stephens wrote about a childhood friend of his named Brian. Brian and he grew up in the same neighborhood and they became best buddies. Brian was a little different. He was held back in school because he was slow and couldn’t keep up with the other kids academically. He wasn’t very coordinated, his clothes often didn’t match and he was sometimes awkward. But for Steve Brian was just Brian, his friend. That stuff didn’t matter, he accepted him for who he was. Then came junior high, that cruelest period of life. Other kids began to make fun of Brian. At first Steve stuck up for his friend. But pretty soon Steve faced a problem. He says he was an in-betweenner. He wasn’t cool enough to be in the popular group and he wasn’t freaky enough to be in the loser group. That was a precarious place to be, for one misstep could send you into

the loser group. Without ever admitting it to himself he realized that his association with Brian could easily have disastrous social consequences for him. So he kept his mouth shut. Then as the peer pressure increased he caved in altogether. He started avoiding Brian. Throughout his teen years he just pretended he didn't know him. Later, as an adult, he began to feel guilty and even embarrassed by how badly he had treated his friend. He wondered about trying to locate him and reconnect with him. He was to find out that it was too late. Life became too painful and too difficult for Brian. He became a drug user and eventually died of an overdose. By obsession with himself, by the desire to have status for himself, Steve, along with almost everyone else in the world, set a trap for Brian. That trap was fatal for him.

What does that mean to us? It tells us we need to get off the ladder of comparison and competition, which is the ladder of pride. It tells us we need to become like the weaned child, the one who is calm and at peace. We are calm and at peace with who we are and our place in this world. Well how do we become at peace like that? Verse 3 tells us. Put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore. But what does that mean? It means that we trust that God's love for us is sufficient. It means trusting in the value, the worth we have in God's eyes, proven at the cross. It means we learn to rest in that and have nothing to prove.

When we look at the cross we can relax. We can be that weaned child, whether we are the most famous person in the world or whether we are the most ignored, most powerless person on the planet. Our value, our identity comes from God's love for us, and nothing else.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER THAT THE PRIDE IS A NARCOTIC

People get addicted to narcotics because of how they make them feel. But the narcotic is an illusion. Yes, for a time the addict feels good, but it wears off and then he must have more. So he must keep going back more and more frequently to get a fix and feel good. That's what the world's pride does to us. No matter how much of it we get it is never enough, so we keep pursuing more fixes. So we go through life thinking, "see me, applaud me, approve of me, serve me, acknowledge me, give me my way." We must have that fix, we think, or we will die.

One of the scary things about pride is that, like a narcotic, it dulls our senses. We can't see it in ourselves! Who of us thinks he is proud or arrogant? But we must ask, who among us never sins? We know that none of us is perfect. We all sin. Remember that every sin is preceded by pride. That means all of us are proud. We

say, “well, maybe that’s true, but my problem is not that bad.” Isn’t that what every addict says? In the end, like narcotics, pride can destroy our lives.

FOCUS ON LOVING OTHERS

One of the greatest antidotes to our pride is refusing to make life about ourselves. Focus on what Jesus did, which is to serve others. He came to give us life. He humbled himself, Philippians 2 tells us, to the point of dying on the cross. He did not do that to show how great he was. He did it to do good to us, to bring us the hope of forgiveness and eternal life. His whole life was about giving to others. We should seek to give others life just as he did.

If we make it our goal to love others, to build them up and affirm them and put whatever others may think of us completely out of our thinking, whether we are respected, valued, seen as significant, noticed or given credit, will be irrelevant.

Years ago when Toby was younger he and I were playing catch with the football. His throws on one occasion were consistently off target. He was frustrated by that and couldn’t figure out why it was happening. I watched more carefully to see if I could identify what he was doing wrong. His throwing motion was fine, but then I got an inkling of what the problem might be. I asked him, what are you looking at when you throw? He said, “Uh, I don’t know.” I was pretty sure what he was doing was shifting his eyes to watch the flight of the ball. I said, “Focus on the target. Aim at my chest and keep your eyes right there.” All of a sudden throw after throw was right on target. If we are focusing on what people think of us, on our pride, we cannot target building them up unless it is a way of convincing them to think well of us. But when we focus on others, our own pride will get out of focus and we’ll quit making it our target.

LIVE AT THE CROSS

The cross tells us that all of our pride is an illusion. Unfortunately it is an illusion that is deadly for us and for others. It ultimately was deadly for the Lord Jesus. He was there because of our pride! But it also tells us of our enormous worth in God’s eyes. What we need to do is realize that in comparison every other effort at worth is dangerous and inane.

Line up people before the cross. Imagine Bill Gates, one of the world’s richest men, President Obama, perhaps the world’s most powerful man, Kristen Stewart, according to *Forbes* magazine the highest paid actress in Hollywood this year, Adrian Rogers, the quarterback of the Green Bay Packers, and Jesus Acevedo, the

man who mows our lawn since I can't do it because of nearly deathly allergies, all standing before the cross. Mr. Acevedo knows that he is loved by God because he has put his faith in Jesus and what he did for him at the cross. Which of those people has impressed God? Which of them can claim to be perfect and acceptable in God's eyes? Which of them has earned his love? I don't know about the spiritual state of all those people, but I know this. Only by putting their faith in Jesus can they be loved and accepted by God. So none of them has anything to be proud of as they stand before the cross. Neither do we. So be done with pride and rest in your worth in Christ. Put your hope in God.

Several years ago Laurie and I went out one evening to a restaurant. As we were talking we were interrupted. A man had walked over to our table and said, "Rick Myatt! Do you remember me?" He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. I knew that I had known him in the past, but I just couldn't figure out where. I told him I recognized him but was having trouble coming up with his name. He introduced himself and as soon as he said his name it all came flooding back to me. This was the proud pastor that made those meetings so difficult for me so many years ago. Only he is no longer a pastor. He had to always be right. Everything always had to be his way. Eventually his wife could no longer take always being wrong and living in his huge shadow. His marriage blew up. Then, since he knew better what was good for him than God did he had an affair with the wife of one of the elders of his church. His pride was his downfall. It ruined his marriage and destroyed his ministry. He lost his family, his ministry and his self-respect. Now many years later he has remarried and has built a successful career in business, he seems at peace, is much more humble and he was no longer inviting me into competition. But pride had unraveled his life. Let's don't do that. Let's become like little children and humble ourselves.