



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

THE ENEMIES OF THE SOUL

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ APRIL 10, 2022

— GETTING OFF OUR HIGH HORSE —

Introduction

The last several weeks of Lent have been intended to prepare us for the culmination of the church year, Holy Week, which begins on Palm Sunday. Lent is traditionally a solemn season of introspection. So, throughout these six weeks, your pastors have collaborated on a sermon series that we have called, *The Enemies of the Soul*. The enemies of the soul are those vices which would seek to take our eyes off Jesus and trip us up. Together, we have explored worry, fear, doubt, envy and bitterness in order that we might declare victory over them. Today, we will focus upon our final *Enemy of the Soul* in this series, one which C.S. Lewis has titled, **The Great Sin: Pride**. John Stott has written, “At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is the greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.”

Let’s begin by clearing up some terms, because the word “pride” is used in a couple different senses. Sometimes the manner in which we speak of pride is not all that bad. At times, when we use the word pride, we simply mean that we take great pleasure in something. For instance, you may take great pleasure—or pride—in your work. When a task is completed and done well, we feel a certain sense of satisfaction in it. This is not the pride that I’m referencing. God has designed us to find meaning in our work. Further, we may experience pride in our children when they excel or achieve something of consequence. Pride, as in finding satisfaction in work or chil-

dren, is obviously not a bad thing. By using the term *pride*, I do not intend to refer to these situations any more than I intend to speak of a cluster of lions.

A State of Mind

Rather, what we are addressing is something entirely different. There are a couple of synonyms that may help us to get to the sense of the word *pride* for our purposes today. When we are speaking about pride today, we intend to address vanity, conceit, or even hubris, all of which the scriptures consistently condemn. A conceited or vain person is oriented inwardly. Rather than focusing outwardly—upon a job well done or another person’s success—the conceited or vain person’s orientation is on elevating his or her own status or needs even at the expense of others. This is the type of pride which the Bible and even the classic Greek philosophers warned us against. This is the type of pride for which the saying goes, “Pride comes before the fall.”

According to Lewis, who called pride the Great Sin, all other vices and enemies of our soul pale in comparison to pride, because every other sin is birthed of pride. In *Mere Christianity*, he writes: “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.**”

That is a pretty serious indictment, so it’s worth our consideration for today, that we might gain victory over this great enemy of our souls.

God’s designed orientation for the human heart is to bring praise and honor and glory to God—to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. This is what we were made for and what we will ultimately do for all of eternity. We don’t praise God because God is insecure, vain, or in some way needs our affirmation, but because God is so great, gracious, and glorious that in the presence of God, the natural response is to bow in reverence and offer glory.

The inverse, or anti-God, state of mind, then, is to reorient praise and honor and glory toward ourselves. This, just like Pastor Su mentioned

for [the enemy of the soul] doubt, tracks all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The snake tempted Adam and Eve by suggesting that if they ate of the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*, they would become like God. Adam and Eve knew that there was no becoming greater than God (there is no such thing). Humanity's great temptation is to elevate our own status to being equal to God's, thus seeking what rightly belongs to God—all glory, laud, and honor, as we sang this morning. Thus humanity fell to the great temptation of pride.

To focus on this great temptation today, we will confer with what God has to say about it by means of the iconic moment in Jesus' ministry for which this day is set apart, His triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. Each of the Gospels portrays this moment, but we will be reading from John's account.

Jesus' notoriety had been growing. He was performing all sorts of signs and wonders, which simultaneously caused His followers and detractors to swell in number. Jesus set off for Jerusalem from Bethany, a small village on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives about two miles outside of Jerusalem. Jesus had history in Bethany and He returned to town despite His disciples' fear of opposition from the religious leaders. Bethany was the town where His friend Lazarus had lived and had died. It was there, into the dark tomb of death where Lazarus' lifeless body lay, where Jesus spoke life. The miracle of raising Lazarus not only caused His fame to grow and the religious elite to conspire in a devious plot that would take His life, but also foreshadowed His own victory and power over death. So for obvious reasons, His disciples did not want him to return to Bethany.

But He did. Jesus returned to the home of Lazarus, where Mary anointed Him with expensive perfume—a symbol which Jesus suggested was done in preparation for His burial. The home of Lazarus, which previously reeked of death, was filled with the fragrance of expensive perfume. The next day, Jesus left Bethany and a great crowd of supporters spilled out of Bethany following Him. Word from Bethany must have already reached Jerusalem, because a multitude of people were streaming out from the city to meet Jesus.

These two crowds converge upon Jesus in the events recorded in John, Chapter 12. Hear now the Word of the Lord from John 12:12-19.

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the king of Israel!”

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

¹⁵“Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;
see, your king is coming,
seated on a donkey’s colt.”

¹⁶At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

¹⁷Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!”

May God grant us understanding of these words.

Interpretation

Horses have long been a symbol of power, victory and fame. They are powerful animals—strong and fast. They are such a symbol of power that since the dawn of the automobile industry, we have measured the power of cars against them. We call it horsepower. Generations of men have stood around grunting and scratching in garages inquiring, “How many horses does it have?” My nephew, who just turned 16, loves cars, and while he was here a few weeks ago, he and his father went to several of the high-end car dealerships around. Later that trip, my nephew rode with me for an errand and asked me, “How many horses does your car have?” I replied that I

was pretty sure my Toyota Prius has about a half a horsepower, that an actual horse is stronger and faster than my Prius. (Actually, it has 99 hp.) Horses have been symbols of power.

Historically, the power of horses provided strategic advantage to armies during conflicts. If an army went to war, the infantry was bolstered by the ability to send in the cavalry! Therefore the horse has become a symbol of power and victory. After a victory was won, often statues were placed in town squares featuring a military leader atop a horse, with sword outstretched in hand.

The respect and status that horses command has even led some horses to become famous household names. Every one of us can probably think of few famous horses. For example, a 2003 award-winning movie depicted a small and unlikely racehorse who went on to defeat a Triple Crown winner to become the top earning horse in the 1940s. Can anyone name that horse? Seabiscuit. Beyond the horses whose stories were made into Hollywood movies, some horses have even become actors! Roy Rogers—what a great last name he has [*did that sound like pride?*]*—Roy Rogers had a famous horse. Can you recall his name? Trigger. Then, there was... well: "A horse is a horse, of course, of course, and no one can talk to a horse of course, that is, of course, unless the horse is ... "* What was his name? Mister Ed. Why there are even beverage companies that hawk their spirits around Christmastime with Clydesdales!

By contrast, how many famous donkeys do you know? Politicians excluded. I can think of only one, offhand: Donkey from the 2001 DreamWorks film *Shrek*. I love Donkey. He's an annoying yet lovable, funny, and endearing character from the *Shrek* movies. What is brilliant about the character is that the personality (voiced by Eddie Murphy) perfectly fits the odd-looking, stubborn nature of a donkey. Whereas many horses have become household names, Donkey is such a humble animal they didn't even give him a name! He's just Donkey. One of my favorite lines in the movie is when someone refers to Donkey as a "noble steed." He replies, "Did you hear that, Shrek? She called me a noble steed!"

The truth is that Donkey probably has an inferiority complex, because the donkey is a rather humble animal. Donkeys are smaller and slower than horses. Though beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, I certainly do not think they are as beautiful as horses. They are sort of funny looking. Power and nobility are not associated with them, but stubbornness and dullness are. And yet this is the animal upon which Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem. But why? While there are not very many famous donkeys in Hollywood, there are several in the Bible. The Bible even has a donkey that is a prophet, that speaks like the one from Shrek! But why did Jesus choose to ride one?

When King David of Israel was getting old and about to go the way of all humanity, his fourth-born son, Adonijah (who, by this time, was likely his eldest surviving son), put himself forward to be king in his father's stead. His father was technically still alive, but Adonijah began parading himself around as heir to the throne. First Kings 1 recounts: "Now Adonijah... put himself forward and said, 'I will be king.' So he got chariots and horses ready with fifty men to run ahead of him (1 Kings 1:5, NIV)."

Do you think that pride may have been an issue? To gain power, he leveraged chariots and horses, symbols of power and might. The Bible records that Adonijah was also very handsome and 1 Kings even suggests that David never challenged him on his poor behavior, so his pride created a huge ego issue. Bathsheba, King David's wife and the mother of Solomon, reported the power-grab to David and said, "I thought you promised that my son, Solomon, was going to be king!" So, David called in Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and some other leaders and said,

Take your lord's servants with you and have Solomon my son mount my own **mule** and take him down to Gihon... and have Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet anoint him king over Israel. (1 Kings 1:32-34, NIV)

So Solomon, whose name meant peace and therefore who was the prince of peace, was made king on David's throne after entering Gihon on the eastern slopes of Mount Zion in Jerusalem. The prince of

peace and heir of Israel came in riding on a donkey—or at least a donkey-mix.

According to the Gospels, Jesus deliberately chose a donkey. Because David's throne was often symbolized by the donkey, everyone expected that the Messiah would return to Jerusalem and sit on David's throne and that it would be symbolized by his riding on a donkey. That's actually why John quotes the messianic prediction found in Zechariah 9:

See, your king comes to you righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey... he will proclaim peace to the nations and his rule will extend from sea to sea. (selections from Zechariah 9:9-10)

Like Solomon before, Jesus did not enter Jerusalem on a warhorse as an outward prideful demonstration of power and victory over Rome or the Sanhedrin. Rather, Jesus came in humility. His victory would not be a violent military defeat, but He would achieve victory over sin and death by His obedience. Jesus came not on a high horse, but on a lowly donkey.

Conquering Pride

C.S. Lewis, once again suggests about pride,

There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.

It is really easy to spot pride in others. When we do, there is even a phrase that we sometimes use. We say, "Get down off your high horse." But though it is easy to find in others, pride is much more difficult to identify and conquer in our own lives. The moment we think we have conquered it, supposing, "Now, I'm so humble," we are more in danger of succumbing to pride than when we first began! We have just saddled up the high horse again.

However, if pride is the anti-God state of mind, because the posture is to look down on others as opposed to up to God, then we must conquer it. Let me offer three practical ways to conquer pride:

1) To get off of our own high horses from which we look down on others, we have to **first look up to God**. Part of what causes pride in our lives is that we compare ourselves with others and seek to elevate ourselves in our eyes or theirs, supposing that we are not as bad or morally reprehensible. However, the standard by which we are judged was never other people. The standard by which we are judged is the righteousness of Christ, a standard that none of us has achieved. The great hope of Christianity is that Christ's righteousness is given to us as a gift through faith in Jesus. God takes our sin upon Himself on Good Friday and gives us His righteousness.

By looking up to God, we realize the futility of comparing ourselves with others. And as C.S. Lewis has said, "In God we come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself." When we encounter the greatness of God, we will be humbled. The more we encounter God, the more we will be humbled. In the vast greatness of God, we even forget about ourselves, which is the true meaning of humility. Our lives become so outwardly focused that we cease considering our own needs. So, the real test of being in the presence of God is whether you forget about yourself altogether. We must first look up to God, and offer all glory, laud, and honor to the One who truly deserves it.

2) Secondly, to get off our high horses, we must consistently **put others ahead of ourselves, seeking to serve and build them up**. Just a few days from Palm Sunday, Jesus would be gathered with His disciples and He would take the form of a servant, washing His disciples' feet. Jesus said to them, "I have set an example for you. A servant is not greater than his master. You are blessed if you do these things." By encountering God and by serving and building up others, we will battle against the gravitational pull that seeks to orient all the glory, laud, and honor to ourselves.

3) And third, we must **be consistently aware of the deviousness of pride**. The deceitfulness of sin will always seek to place us back on the high horse, to make life about ourselves. To overcome this, we must be consistently willing to do what we have done for the last six

weeks of Lent—to examine ourselves and see if the enemies of the soul have taken root within us. A fearless self-inventory and confession to God reveals the truth about ourselves and our dependence upon our Savior.

So Jesus arrives in Jerusalem riding on a donkey on a Sunday. He is greeted with the waving of palms and people laying their cloaks down before Him. People seem to recognize Him as the Messiah King with shouts of hosannas and praises. When we encounter God, we cannot help but respond in this manner.

However, a few short days later, on Friday, the crowds who raised hosannas shouted, “Crucify him!” And the One who will judge the nations is judged and deemed guilty by the ones He came to save. Was there ever a greater witness to human pride in this desire to place themselves over God?

Pride is the great enemy of the soul. To close, let me share with you a charge as we enter into Holy Week. This charge comes in the form of Philippians 2, which summarizes the events we will remember in the coming days.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Let's follow our Savior, who didn't get up on a high horse, but rather a lowly donkey. Let's give all glory, laud, and honor to the One who truly deserves it, consider others as better than ourselves, and by self-examination recognize our need for a Savior this Holy Week. ■



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