

The Pillar: Chapter 6 (Part 1 of 5)

Beware of the Subtleties of Pride

1 Timothy 6:1-5

Mark Vroegop

Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. ²Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.

Teach and urge these things. ³If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, ⁴he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, ⁵and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain (1 Timothy 6:1-5).

Jonathan Edwards described a particular sin in graphic and alarming language. He called it the “first and worst cause of error, the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of Christ, the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit to darken the mind and mislead the judgment, and the main handle by which Satan takes hold of Christians to hinder the work of God.”¹ He viewed this sin as so serious and so foundational that to try to deal with other sins without first addressing this one was an exercise in spiritual futility.

What sin issue is this alarming, destructive, and pervasive? The sin of pride.

Now I’m sure you are familiar with this foe. You probably know lots of people who struggle with thinking too highly of themselves, people who look down on you, and those who do not know how blind they are to their arrogance. That is the problem with pride – those who have it don’t know they have it because they are full of it. Edwards says “the proud person is so full of light already and feels he does not need instruction.” Pride is deceptively difficult.

However, there is a form of pride that is exceptionally egregious: spiritual pride. You see, it is one thing for a sinful, worldly person to be full of him or herself. You sort of expect people who have no heart for God and no spiritual concern to be arrogant. After all, they have an empty heart which fills up with self. It’s awful but understandable.

But wouldn’t you agree that when a person uses spirituality to feed his pride, it is worse? The spiritually proud person takes God, the pursuit of him, the love of him and spiritual obedience and

¹ http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?231

they use it not to ultimately worship God but to worship self. It is one thing to use the gifts of God to worship self; it is another to use God to worship self.

Edwards described pride like an onion. You peel off one layer and there is another underneath. He warns us about “the many forms and shapes” of spiritual pride. Our text today, 1 Timothy 6:1-5, shows us two different expressions or examples of the danger of spiritual pride. Paul gives instruction here regarding two groups of people: slaves and false teachers. In the case of slaves, he shows us how the gospel creates humble obedience to believing and unbelieving masters. In the case of false teachers, he shows us the root and fruit of pride in the lives of false teachers. So let’s see how Paul applies the gospel to these two groups and then heed the warning for our own lives.

Slaves: Spiritually Free and Obedient

The first two verses of chapter six speak directly to slaves about how they are to respond to their unbelieving and believing masters. As we read the text, we can deduce that some slaves were taking their spiritual position and negatively applying it. The danger here was that their spiritual pride could result in treating unbelieving or believing masters in a way that did not fit with the gospel.

Now before we dive into the specifics of Paul’s teaching here, we need to briefly address the **problem of slavery** in this text and the rest of the Bible. This is important to talk about because it seems at first reading that Paul is endorsing slavery. Some people use this as a way to discredit the Bible. Others understandably struggle with how to handle this issue, so let me give you a few thoughts that I hope will help us.

I think we need to start from a perspective that we acknowledge the importance of this issue at so many levels. Slavery leaves a scar on every culture that has embraced it. And like a scar after the wound is healed, its presence is a regular reminder of a traumatic and painful event. For instance, my wife has a scar – which you would never notice – over her right eye from when she was hit in the head by the flying pail in the middle of a tornado at an outdoor basketball tournament where a number of people died. To this day, the scar is painful if it gets bumped and when a violent storm comes, it brings back scary feelings. In the same way, slavery – and the racism that went with it – is a sensitive and painful scar for many people in our culture. Regardless of what you think about the Trayvon Martin case, listen to the pain and frustration of the African American community in Sanford, Florida. Racism may be better than what it used to be, but it is still painful, and we still have a long way to go. So I don’t want to ignore this issue out of concern for the text and for my brothers and sisters who hear the word “slave” like my wife hears the word “tornado.”

We have to acknowledge that the Old Testament permitted certain forms of slavery, and when the New Testament talks about slavery, there is not typically a strong condemnation of it as an institution. Verses 1-2 would be a good example, since they seem to condone, or at least permit, slavery. What do we say to this?

- The Old Testament permitted some forms of slavery for those who had to pay off their debts and for those who were captured in war (as opposed to being killed). However, the Law regulated slavery to prevent abuse and kidnapping that was punishable by death (see Ex. 21:16, Deut. 24:7).² So the slave trade connected with our country directly violated the Law.
- The New Testament clearly condemned those who trafficked in slavery as lawless and disobedient. 1Timothy 1:10 lists “enslavers” as those who violate God’s command and heart.
- Historically, Christianity eventually led the way in the abolition of slavery. Now this often did not happen as fast as it should have, and there were well-known Christians who owned slaves, but nothing helped to topple the institution of slavery more than the Christian worldview of the image of God and freedom found in the gospel. “The more fully Christianity is realized in any society, the more thoroughly will slavery be destroyed.”³
- Culturally, slavery was different in the Roman Empire than what it was in America. Slavery was not entirely based upon race, some were voluntary slaves, and many were slaves due to economic hardships. Additionally, Roman slaves actually held important roles in business or government, and they even worked in highly skilled areas such as education or medicine. Further, slavery was in no ways permanent.⁴
- What Paul does in multiple places is help slaves know how they should conduct themselves in the midst of a culture filled with slavery. “Without approving slavery in all its forms, Paul gives pastoral counsel to people who are enslaved.”⁵

So this is how we should think about this issue. The Bible does not condone the wicked and inhumane treatment of people who are enslaved because of embedded racism. Rather, it attempts to help people know how to live practically in a culture that is imperfect.

In verses 1-2 we see two scenarios addressed, and both are related to what the gospel does. The beauty of the cross is that it saves people, regardless of their background, status, or ethnicity. The signature text communicating this is Galatians 3:27. *27For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* The underlying spiritual reality is that the gospel has united people and made them all a part of the family of God.

You can imagine how revolutionary it was to have people from all walks of life – Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free – worshipping together. A relationship with Jesus creates new relationship between people. They were still men and women, slave and free, but there was another reality that united them – oneness in Christ.

² Philip Ryken, *1 Timothy – Reformed Expository Commentary*, (Phillipsburg: New Jersey, 2007), 239.

³ Ryken quoting William Ramsey, *Historical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publishers, 1996), 87.

⁴ Ryken, 240

⁵ Ryken, 239.

But imagine what would happen if you took this too far. What would happen, for instance, if a slave used his new-found identity in Jesus to say to his master “I no longer need to listen to you”? Or what would happen if a slave would say to his believing master “Our oneness in Christ means that you no longer can give me orders”? Paul anticipates that freedom in Christ can lead some to proud triumphalism rather than humble service. The gospel frees you not so that you can triumph over others (that’s Jesus’ role), but for you to lay down your life in service.

Look how this plays out regarding **unbelieving masters**. We assume that they are unbelieving because of the emphasis in verse two. Paul says that these servants are to “regard their own masters as worthy of honor.” Sound familiar? I hope so because this is now the third time that we’ve heard this (5:3 - widows, 5:17 - elders). This is the same word, and it means to treat with respect or to ascribe worth or value to someone because – and this is important – of their God-ordained position. It means that you know that there is a connection between one’s honor of God and one’s honor for those in positions of authority (see also Rom. 13:1). There is a connection between respect for God and respect for authority.

They are to “regard” their masters this way. The meaning here goes beyond the true worthiness of the person. They are to honor all masters – even the ones who might not be worthy of it. They are to “regard their own masters as worthy.” A failure to do this reviles (“blasphemes”) the name of God and the teaching. The warning here is to beware of the subtle presence of pride that can sneak in and create a bad reputation for the gospel. 1 Peter 2 gives us another example of this teaching. Notice the connection to the gospel:

¹³Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

¹⁸Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²²He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls (1 Peter 2:13-25).

Do you see it? Oh friends, beware of the subtle spiritual pride that sees no connection between what you hear on this day and how you live at home, at work, or in the community.

What about **believing masters**? Verse two addresses this issue. It would be equally wrong to be disrespectful to believing masters because they are brothers. You can hear the argument, can’t you? “We worship together on Sunday; we are one in Christ, so you have no right to be my leader or my boss.” But what is this attitude? It is spiritual pride – using a spiritual position to justify a

sinful lack of love. Instead, Paul says you should be considerate of these brothers. In other words, your relationship with them should make you a better servant, not a worse one: "... must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved." In other words, love for God and for your brother should make you a better servant.

Those who have experienced the beauty of undeserved grace – that God has counted them righteous in Christ – will live differently. "After all," asks the Scriptures, "what do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7a). And even further, "why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7b). This is what pride does. It causes us to act foolishly! Again Edwards says:

Pride takes many forms and shapes and encompasses the heart like the layers of an onion- when you pull off one layer, there is another underneath. Therefore, we need to have the greatest watch imaginable over our hearts with respect to this matter and to cry most earnestly to the great searcher of hearts for His help. He who trusts his own heart is a fool.

What a contrast it is to the vision of Paul in Philippians 2. Just listen and be struck again with these powerful words:

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:3-8).

The gospel makes slaves humble, obedient, and free!

False Teachers: Self-deceived and Destructive

Next Paul turns our attention toward the familiar problem of false teachers. They are a problem for multiple reasons, but pride, specifically spiritual pride, is at the root. Paul wants Timothy and the church at Ephesus to realize the damage these false teachers and their pride create.

Verse two ends with another charge to Timothy: "teach and urge these things." What things? The things that Paul has just talked about in chapter five regarding the congregation, widows, elders and now slaves. These were practical matters in regards to how they were living out the gospel. They were important, and Timothy was to impress them on his people.

The problem of the false teachers in Ephesus was a significant one, and at the root was self-centered pride. There are two manifestations of pride: bad doctrine and sinful living.

Paul identifies false doctrine first. He says, "³If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness" (1 Tim. 6:3). Their teaching was not in line with what the Bible taught, and it was particularly errant when it

came to what they did with Jesus. Further, their teaching did not lead to personal godliness. Since Paul is not specific here and since he links it to Jesus and to behavior, the error must have been in regard to the gospel.

By the gospel I mean the message that "Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15). I mean the message that you cannot do anything to save yourself; that you need another's righteousness, another's sacrifice, another's goodness to make you righteous. The gospel means that true righteousness comes through faith not works, belief not actions, by God's actions not our own. It means that we live by promise, not by performance.

This is good news - unless, of course, you are full of yourself. The gospel eliminates all boasting, all self-congratulation, all arrogance, all human merit, and all pride. A biblical, Christ-exalting understanding of the gospel cannot co-exist with pride. Pride and grace are not just opposites; they are enemies.

Do you see the connection? False doctrine and pride are as linked as the gospel and humility. That is why Paul says that if anyone embraces or teaches this false doctrine "*he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing*" (v 4). The word conceited is a strong word. It is a figurative expression of the word that means to be crazy or demented. The idea and the warning here is that a person who is conceited is to be insanely arrogant. Spiritually proud people so lose their moorings that they do and say crazy things. What's more, they risk the spiritual lives of themselves and others. But it gets worse.

While they are dangerously arrogant, what makes them extremely deadly is their total lack of understanding. They understand nothing. This person is as ignorant as he is arrogant. I have never met a person who knew that he was a false teacher, a legalist, or spiritually proud. Instead what happens to such people is that they convince themselves that they are doing God's work; they are convinced that they are right and everyone else is wrong; they honestly believe that they have the answers that other people need. They think that if people would just listen to them, the problem would be solved. And while they talk about Jesus, the real love of their hearts is themselves. They use Jesus to make much of themselves. It is scary.

This is what happens when pride trumps the gospel.

How do you know? What are some of the signs? Well, you see it most clearly when you cross them, oppose them, or challenge them. Their lives are filled with continual conflict. Notice the long list Paul gives us in verses 4-5. Let's look at each of these phrases:

- **An unhealthy craving for controversies** – this is a person who is always looking for and who even enjoys a good fight. These people have an orientation toward confrontation because truth is not just to be savored; it is stepping stone over others toward superiority.
- **Quarrels about words** – there is a narrowness to their views. Everything is black and white; there is no grace, no balance, no wiggle-room. It is "their way or the high-way." These people are constantly crusading for their cause or view point.

- **Envy** – they resent other people’s gifts. Since this person has to be the center of everything, the gifts of others make him or her insecure.
- **Dissension** – conflict that arises from rivalry. It is the outward fruit of inward envy.
- **Slander** – abusive speech intended to harm a person or injure the other person’s reputation.
- **Evil suspicions** – measuring other people up to see if they are competitors or threats. Constantly looking over their shoulder to see who might threaten their position of spiritual power.
- **Constant friction** – there is a low grade irritability just waiting to boil over. The idea here is that it has become a life-style and a pattern because they are “depraved in mind and deprived of the truth.” The tragedy is that spiritual pride eats out your own soul! It leaves you truthless and heartless.
- **Greed (imagining that godliness is a means of gain)** – the final fruit we see here is pathological greediness. Paul likely meant that these false teachers used their position for financial gain; they were in it for the money. But there are other things too: esteem of others, prominence, people who quote you, being viewed as an authority, deference or the ability to control others. And the really sick thing here is that people can use religion, they can use “Jesus” to give them what they want.

Just think how crazy this is! Sinful people who deserve nothing but judgment who use the message or the ministry of God’s grace to advance and glorify themselves! People who make the story of God’s deliverance of awful sinners into a personal kingdom for advancement and power. Could there be anything worse!?

Now you can imagine why Jesus was so tough on the religious rulers of his day. They were using God to make much of themselves. And don’t think for a moment that any of us are immune to this. You may not think of yourself as a “teacher” so you might be tempted to not listen to the warning here, but I would encourage all of us to realize the path of spiritual pride and where it leads.

Spiritual pride leads to self-deception and destruction.

Seeing the Contrast Clearly

Brothers and sisters, we have to beware of the subtleties of pride! We have to see how easily it can show up in our most basic and vital relationships. You may not be down the full path of becoming a false teacher, but don’t you tremble at the list I just reviewed? I think if we are honest, we know that we could easily become like that. So what do you do?

First, it is important to see the problem and the contrast of spiritual pride as opposed to humility. Again, here is where Jonathan Edwards helps us:

- *It is by spiritual pride that the mind defends and justifies itself in other errors and defends itself against light by which it might be corrected and reclaimed. The spiritually proud man thinks he is full of light already and feels that he does not need instruction, so he is ready to ignore the*

offer of it. On the other hand, the humble person is like a little child who easily receives instruction. He is cautious in his estimate of himself, sensitive as to how liable he is to go astray. If it is suggested to him that he is going astray, he is most ready to check into the matter.

- *Spiritual pride causes one to speak of other persons' sins, their enmity against God and His people, or with laughter and levity and an air of contempt, while pure Christian humility disposes one either to be silent about them or to speak of them with grief or pity.*
- *The spiritually proud person shows it in his finding fault with other saints, that they are low in grace and how cold and dead they are, and are quick to discern and take notice of their deficiencies. The eminently humble Christian has so much to do at home and sees so much evil in his own that he is not apt to be very busy with other hearts. He complains most of himself and complains most of his own coldness and lowness in grace.*
- *It has been the manner of spiritually proud persons to speak of almost everything they see in others in the most harsh, severe language. Christians who are but fellow-worms ought at least to treat one another with as much humility and gentleness as Christ treats them.*
- *Spiritual pride takes great notice of opposition and injuries that are received and is prone to be often speaking of them and to be much in taking notice of their aggravation, either with an air of bitterness or contempt. Pure and unmixed Christian humility, on the other hand, causes a person to be more like his blessed Lord when reviled: quiet, not opening his mouth, but committing himself in silence to Him who judges righteously. .*
- *One under the influence of spiritual pride is more apt to instruct others than to inquire for himself and so naturally puts on the airs of control. The eminently humble Christian thinks he needs help from everybody, whereas he that is spiritually proud thinks everybody needs his help. Christian humility, under a sense of other's misery, entreats and beseeches, but spiritual pride tries to command and warn with authority.⁶*

Secondly, and ultimately, we have to continually rehearse and preach the gospel to ourselves. We have to constantly bring our hearts back to the reality of what the Bible tells us. We have to preach the following truths to our hearts: God is holy (Rev. 4:8); we are helpless sinners (Eph. 2:1-3); Jesus took our place (1 Peter 2:24); God treats me like Christ, despite who I really am (Eph. 2:5-7); everything I have is because of grace (1 Cor. 4:7).

Without receiving this gospel, there is no hope for our maniacally self-centered souls. But receiving Christ changes everything: how you view your sin, yourself, and all of life. Grace-receiving people must beware of the subtleties of pride.

After all: "What do you have that you did not receive?"

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⁶ http://www.grace-abounding.com/Articles/Sin/Pride_Edwards.htm