

Danger in Spiritual Pride

***“Be clothed with
humility: for God
resisteth the proud,
and giveth grace to
the humble.”***

—I Peter 5:5

Preface: This month marks the one-hundred-year anniversary of the death of Brother Charles T. Russell, a “faithful and wise servant,” who was used by the Lord to provide “meat in due season” to the household of faith. (Matt. 24:45) One of his final writings, published just one month prior to his death, was an article concerning the dangers of spiritual pride. (R5955) Its sobering and heart-searching words are of great importance to the Lord’s consecrated people, and are just as applicable today as when they were written a century ago. In remembrance of Brother Russell’s faithful ministry, as well as of this subject’s vital significance, we are pleased to republish these words of wise counsel. We have had to abridge the article for space, but trust that nothing has been lost of meaning and force of his admonitions. May they find a lodging place in the forefront of our mind and heart.

PRIDE IN ANY form in God's human creatures is a dangerous thing. The proverb is well attested, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." (Prov. 16:18) Surely, very few people have anything of which they might justly be proud. Some who hold their heads high with the pride of a haughty spirit, as though they were especially created out of some preferable "dust of the earth," have really nothing to boast of as to ancestry. A very few generations back are generally sufficient to silence such boasting.

It is also not wise to boast of riches, lest thereby someone ask how the riches were accumulated and by whom, and whether they were honestly obtained. Pride of education is not appropriate, either, for education in general signifies the learning of what other people have found out or have written as history. Those who would boast of great education have need of humility, lest it be found that the very thing that they are boasting about has been disproven by later researches. Scientific books of the past will not pass muster today, nor their theories stand in the light of present knowledge. Thus, if it were right for one to boast of knowledge, he would need to be very careful to keep up to date.

Pride of one's beauty or physical appearance is scarcely to be excused. The beauty of form and feature came by heredity, and the parent, rather than the child, might have some reason for pride. Pride as respects clothing and adornments is also foolish. The maker of the fabrics or the ornaments might have some reason for pride in their handiwork, but surely the wearer does not. He is merely appropriating to himself the skill and labor of others.

SPIRITUAL PRIDE WORST OF ALL

The pride which is merely foolish or somewhat hypocritical in this present world becomes a very serious matter indeed if it invades the heart and the life of the child of God. Why do we make such a difference? Why say that spiritual pride would be so very dangerous in one of the Lord's saints, whereas it would be little more than foolishness in the world? The difference is that these are God's special ambassadors in the world, who must become copies of God's dear Son if they would ever attain to the glory, honor and immortality to which they have been invited by the Lord.—II Cor. 5:20; Rom. 2:7

When they gave themselves entirely to the Lord in consecration and were justified from sin through the imputation of the Redeemer's sacrifice, and were thus introduced into the family of God and begotten of the Holy Spirit, it meant a great change for these. (Rom. 5:1-11; 12:1,2) Old things passed away, and all things became new. (II Cor. 5:17) These, and these alone, are on trial during this Gospel Age for eternal life or death. Of all their temptations and beguilements, the sin of spiritual pride is probably one of the most dangerous of all. In proportion as it enters in, the Spirit of the Lord departs, and the spiritual health of the individual declines. This spiritual sickness, unless curbed, would lead eventually to Second Death, for "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble."—James 4:6

The Apostle Peter evidently had this besetting danger of spiritual pride in mind when he wrote, using nearly identical language as James, the words of our opening text. Then, in the verse following, he added: "Humble yourselves therefore under the

mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.” (I Pet. 5:6) Likewise, the Master taught: “Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”—Matt. 23:12

A SYMPTOM OF THIS SOUL-SICKNESS

How may we know spiritual pride? One of the most sobering things in this connection is that those who have spiritual pride very rarely are aware of it. They sometimes have forms of godliness, which not only may deceive others, but also deceive themselves, hindering them from seeing the spiritual pride which is working and which others may more readily see.

If we feel that our attendance at meetings, our reading and studying daily of the Scriptures, our distribution of many tracts, or our circulation of so many books, are matters to be boasted of, then we must take care! Such a disposition to boast is an indication that we would be in danger of catching spiritual pride. These are all good, laudable, and proper activities. We should feel an appropriate degree of thankfulness that we find ourselves able and willing to do things so reasonable, proper, and in harmony with the divine will. However, any disposition to boast of the matter should lead us to a careful scrutiny of thought, and of the motives lying behind these activities in the Lord’s service.

We are not meaning to say that it would be improper to give a testimony in which these activities might be brought forward as an encouragement to others, or as a humble witness that we love the Lord and are anxious to serve him. What we are

cautioning against is a spirit, or disposition, to boast of anything that we might be or do as the Lord's children. Indeed, we have nothing whereof to boast. If we gave all of our goods to feed the spiritually poor, all our time to circulating the Gospel message, and all of our energy to the honoring of the Lord's name, we should feel that, having "done all those things, . . . We are unprofitable servants. (Luke 17:10) That is, we merely found an opportunity of showing a little of the devotion of our hearts in acknowledgment of the numberless blessings we have received at the Lord's hand.

STILL FURTHER SYMPTOMS

Another form of the disease of spiritual pride manifests itself in an overcritical attitude of mind. One may attend a testimony meeting, or a study, and feel that he hears no good testimony but his own, or hears no proper answer except his own to any of the questions of a study. One may even feel that the elder chairing the meeting does not really know how to do so. These should all be considered dangerous symptoms of spiritual pride.

This is not to say that these things might not possibly occur. Under such circumstances, it would be proper for us to give attention, and be well informed, that we would see quickly any unscriptural proceeding, or any instance of very poor judgment that would be a hindrance to the effectiveness of the meetings. It would be proper, too, if ever we saw that the best interests of the class were not being served, and if, after waiting patiently for a while, we found that they were not likely to be corrected, to call attention to the matter in a meek and quiet

spirit, and in the most effective and least demonstrative way. In all such cases, we are to remember: “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory,” but all things should be done to the glory of God.—Phil. 2:3

Here too we need to be careful, lest we begin thinking that everything which harmonizes with our ideas is to the glory of God, and that whatever does not harmonize with our viewpoints could not be pleasing to him. Wisely the apostle wrote: “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools.” (Eph. 5:15) We do well to note the meaning of this word “circumspectly”—that it signifies close scrutiny on every hand, especially as respects thoughts, motives, intentions.

“BE NOT MANY OF YOU TEACHERS”

The Apostle James wrote, “Do not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive a severer judgment.” (James 3:1, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*) As we have pointed out, all of the Lord’s people are especially susceptible along the line of spiritual pride. However, there seems to be a special danger surrounding all who become in any manner identified as “teachers” in the promulgation and ministry of the Truth.

It is a special privilege, indeed, to tell out the message of God’s grace to all who have a hearing ear. How thankful we are that this is not, as it was once supposed, the exclusive privilege of a designated clergy class. The Lord declares that all who are his consecrated people and who receive the begetting of the Holy Spirit have, through it, the anointing to “preach good tidings unto the meek,” and to “bind

up the brokenhearted.” (Isa. 61:1) We are glad of this privilege, which includes even our private conversations with family, neighbors, and friends. What an honor it is to be God’s ambassadors, and in his name to tell of the coming kingdom. What a joy is ours to speak of the great provision God has already made through the death of Jesus, and of how the kings and priests of his kingdom are now being called out of the world, experiencing a change of nature in preparation for their future work.

Old as the message is, it is new and wonderful, if rightly presented, so as to awaken astonishment in the honest-hearted who hear. They wonder, perhaps, how this ordinary man or woman ever came to understand and to so beautifully portray these wonderful things. They may give us a hint of their surprise. Then, however, comes a danger-moment for developing a symptom of the disease of spiritual pride. With just a little swing of the mind, we may feel self-honor that we know about such things when the great mass of mankind has not the remotest conception of them, and that even most of the most talented ministers of the Word of God are ignorant respecting these truths.

The proper attitude, as all will agree, is that the Lord’s people should feel greatly humbled, instead of exalted and heady, in respect to the opportunities for telling the Truth to others. We should feel our unworthiness. We should realize that the message is not ours—that we have merely heard of it ourselves—that it is really God’s plan, and we are honored as his servants to tell it out. If, however, we allow an impression to be given that it is by any wisdom or skill on our part that the beauty of the message is

seen, then to that extent we are taking glory to ourselves which belongs to the Lord. In this, we would be doing injury to ourselves proportionately by failing to demonstrate our worthiness to be used by the Lord in the present and in the future. Rather, the wonderful opportunity of speaking as ambassadors for the Lord, to tell of his greatness and plan, should humble us with the thought that he has privileged us to be used in communicating this most wonderful message.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THIS SIN

The Bible gives many illustrations of this sin, but we choose a most conspicuous one. Moses was a holy man of old, beloved of the Lord, noble, self-sacrificing, and a prophet. He served God and his people faithfully and wonderfully for forty years. Yet, Moses fell victim to the sin of self-assurance—a form of spiritual pride. Strangest of all, he is noted in the Bible at the beginning of his career as having been “very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.”—Num. 12:3

Moses, at the beginning of his experience as a servant of the Lord was very meek and humble. However, near the conclusion of his life, he was hindered from entering the promised land as a punishment for demonstrating spiritual pride, when he should have given the Lord the glory. We recall the circumstances. Moses, as the Lord’s special servant, had led Israel out of Egypt across the Red Sea into the wilderness, in route to Canaan. He performed, by God’s direction, several miracles on the journey. One of them was the smiting of the rock when the people were thirsting for water. God

directed him to strike the rock with his rod, and from it flowed an abundant stream of water for the refreshment of the people.—Exod. 17:1-6

According to the Scriptures, that rock was a picture of Christ. (I Cor. 10:4) It was by God's arrangement that this "Rock of Ages" was smitten. By this smitten rock, the water of life would eventually flow from Jesus to all of Adam's race. However, the first to benefit from this are those who would become Israelites indeed. They would come out of symbolic Egypt—out of the world, out of sin, out of the kingdom of the Adversary—into obedience and fellowship with the Lord.

Nearly forty years after the smiting of the rock by Moses, during which Israel had journeyed in the wilderness, waiting for the time to come that they might be permitted to enter Canaan, they once again came to a place barren and devoid of water. The account of this experience is recorded in Numbers 20:1-12. The people cried to Moses. He, in turn, went to the Lord on their behalf as to what should be done. The Lord's answer was that Moses should speak to the rock, which previously he had smitten, and that water would come forth. During the forty years in which Moses had dealt with the Israelites as a father with his children, he had likely gained a great deal of self-assurance. Having passed through such experiences, it would seem hardly possible that Moses could still be the meekest man in all the earth.

Neglecting the command of the Lord, Moses went to the rock and, rather than speak to it as God had commanded, smote it, not once, but twice, shouting to the people: "Ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?" (vs. 10) In his weakness, and in

his frustration with the people, Moses took the glory of this miracle to himself instead of ascribing it entirely to the Lord. Soon he realized the great mistake he had made. Yet, the Lord on this account denied him the privilege of going into the land of Canaan, granting him instead merely the opportunity of seeing it from across the River Jordan, and burying him there.

We might wonder whether the punishment laid upon Moses was too harsh, but that decision rested in the all-wise hands of the Lord. More importantly to us, from this illustration it is clear that spiritual pride and self-assurance are very displeasing in the sight of God. Indeed, we cannot draw any other conclusion from this great lesson, written for our admonition.

A WORD OF CONSOLATION

If we feel that we have done much worse than Moses—been more self-assertive, much less careful to honor the Lord, or have manifested much more spiritual pride—for our comfort let us notice that the punishment of Moses was severe because it was part of a type. The first smiting of the rock typified the crucifixion of our Lord. The unauthorized double-smiting of the rock in the second case typified the crucifying of “the Son of God afresh,” and putting him “to an open shame,” as described by Paul in Hebrews 6:6. The latter smiting of the rock represented public, open repudiation of Jesus and the merit of his shed blood, and the preventing of Moses from crossing Jordan into Canaan typified the cutting off in Second Death those who willfully deny the blood which bought them. Because this is a

picture, we are not to think that Moses will never come into “Canaan” or receive the promises of God. Neither has Moses died the Second Death, but this was merely illustrated and shown in his experiences.

We should not think, either, that brethren who may have manifested spiritual pride and done things in their own name, rather than in the name of the Lord, have thereby committed the sin unto death. We are, however, to realize that a terrible danger goes with spiritual pride, and that, if persisted in, without reform, it would surely put such a one in jeopardy of Second Death. Realizing this, how sober-minded and careful we should be, not only in the eradication of every symptom of it we might find in ourselves, but also in being watchful lest we should spread such a contagion to others in the household of faith.

SPIRITUAL PRIDE—PREVENTION AND CURE

We have already intimated the difficulty in connection with the treatment of this disease when once it gets hold. One of the chief features of the difficulty seems to be that the disease has a destroying effect upon the conscience. The mind becomes more or less insensitive to the simple principles of the Golden Rule, and even the still higher law of our Lord’s “new commandment” to love the brethren. (John 13:34,35) The ignoring of these principles might be manifested in attempts to force our own will on the ecclesia, whether it be in the election of its servants, the ordering of its meetings, or in some other way.

Concerning this important arrangement, decision-making authority resides with the ecclesia. If and

when an elder or other member of the class attempts to twist or turn or alter this, he is not doing to others as he would desire to have done to him. He has a right, as one member of the ecclesia, to his own opinion of the Lord's will on any matter. He has the right to express his judgment. He has no right, however, to hinder others from the expression of their judgment. Every such interference is a violation of the Golden Rule as well as of the law of love. It is even a violation of the First Commandment—to love and honor God—for it is setting aside the divine arrangement provided for such matters.

Where an elder or any other member of the ecclesia persists along such lines, in defiance of Scriptural principles, by coercing or cajoling the ecclesia to the doing of things his way, the effect is the perversion of his own mind. His conscience becomes clouded and blind to righteousness. Whoever so violates his conscience repeatedly, by ignoring the principles of right and wrong conduct clearly set out in the Scriptures, is undermining and severely weakening his standing before the Lord.

Conscience is the scale by which we weigh the various things presented to our judgment to ascertain right or wrong, justice or injustice, truth or falsehood. Depending on the individual, this scale may be a very coarse one or a very fine one. The Christian, especially if he has been long in the school of Christ, should have a very sensitive conscience. From the Word of God, he should be able to draw the weights by which he would balance all the questions of the affairs of life, and determine with great accuracy that which is right or wrong, and what would be pleasing or displeasing to the Lord.

The impairment of that scale is the great danger in every sin, and it seems to be especially so in respect to the sin of spiritual pride. Nothing much can be done in proper service to the Lord until the scale be rectified.

How important it should feel to all of the Lord's people to keep their consciences thoroughly just. How unwilling we should be to ever take advantage of one of our brethren, or of anybody, either in business, in personal matters, or in ecclesia decisions. As a child of God, the thought of the slightest infraction of justice on our part should ring the loudest bells of alarm in our heart and mind. We should ask, "Could it be that I who have enlisted in this cause of justice should be found sympathetic with injustice? Could it be that I could close my eyes to anything in my own conduct in the nature of injustice? Can it be that I am violating my own conscience and shall be liable for all the consequences?"

To rectify such a wrong course would mean the reestablishment of the principles of justice in our hearts and minds with a carefulness proportionate to the results involved—life or death everlasting. As justice shall begin to be reestablished in our minds, it will begin to once again regulate our words and acts. Gradually, we will begin to see how grossly we had violated this principle, and how spiritual pride had almost destroyed our future prospects in the kingdom. To us would surely come hearty repentance and thorough resolutions for the future.

NECESSITY FOR SELF-EXAMINATION

How shall we safeguard ourselves against spiritual pride, knowing as we do its insidious character

and evil influence? How may we know that we are keeping ourselves in the love of God and not straying in a direction toward spiritual pride?

Prayer seems to be vital in this regard. As the Lord's consecrated people, we should first go to him at the opening of each day, and ask for Divine wisdom and supervision. Then, through the day we should seek to live in accordance with that prayer. At the close of the day we should conduct a self-inspection as respects the things done, the things neglected that should have been done, and the things done that should not have been done, in accordance with our vows of consecration to the Lord. If these reckonings at the close of each day with the Lord continue, and if they are done honestly by a conscience that is in proper spiritual balance, we may surely expect that, in harmony with the Lord's Word, we will be keeping ourselves in the love of God. (Jude 21) We will be growing in grace, in knowledge, and in love, and the "wicked one" will not touch us.—I John 5:18

Let us also not forget that, while we are to exercise great leniency in viewing the words and deeds of others, ascribing only good intentions where they are professed, we are to scrutinize with all of our might our own hearts and intentions. Such a careful examination, weighing of thoughts, words and deeds, would be very unsatisfactory to a person who was not wishing to be in accord with the Lord. If, however, we have made a covenant with the Lord and are striving to be faithful to that covenant, we will find such a course to be a great blessing, comforting to our hearts at the time, and strengthening to us for the future. By the Lord's providences it will be fitting and preparing us for a place in the heavenly kingdom. ■