

Pride and Perception

1 Cor. 4:1-7

The church in Corinth was a really troubled church. It had issues – a lot of issues! If you found their website, under “about us” the drop down would include such descriptions as: “church split in progress – we have a faction for you!” “Extreme sexual immorality accepted here.” “Real wine used in communion – come watch Deacon Dave get blitzed again this Sunday!” It is a really messed up church! But if you found their “core issues” page, there would just be one thing listed. At the bottom of all their problems, all their issues, all their mess was one thing: pride. The Corinthian church was a proud church.

Last week we saw that one of the effects of pride in their church was that they thought they were qualified to judge things that Paul says need to be left to God. Pride had elevated them off the field where the work was being done and put them in the judge’s box. Paul admonishes them: *do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.* (vs. 5) Some things we aren’t meant to pre-judge, we need to leave them to God’s judgment.

This week I want to focus on the effect of pride on their perception. How pride distorted the way they saw themselves, each other, and God. Those of you who are older probably remember a comic strip called *The Far Side* by Gary Larson. In one of my favorites, a woman is in the passenger seat of a car and she looks out at the side view mirror and the mirror is completely filled with a giant eyeball. And on the bottom of the mirror are the words, *Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.* There is no caption. You are just left with this woman pondering those words: *objects in mirror are closer than they appear.*

Pride is like a really bad side view mirror, distorting our perception of reality, making us appear bigger than we really are, making God appear far smaller than He really is. And sometimes shrinking, sometimes enlarging other people depending on how they reflect our perception of ourselves at the time.

Paul is trying to correct the Corinthians pride-distorted perception of reality and so in verse 6 he says, *I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written...*

Applied what things? Verse 1: *This is how one should regard us (or perceive us), as servants of Christ...* The word Paul used for servants originally referred to the slaves who rowed in the lower tier of ancient war ships. The word came to mean subservient, under a superior. They should see Paul and Apollos as servants of Christ, bottom tier rowers, servants and subservient to their Lord Jesus Christ. And by implication, if Paul and Apollos are lower tier servants, than they should also see themselves as servants of Christ as well. Paul wants them to regain a Christ-focused humility.

Humility isn’t thinking that we’re worthless. It isn’t about mercilessly demeaning and degrading ourselves all the time. Humility is the ability to see ourselves accurately – as Paul puts it, not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. This kind of perspective can only come when we correctly see ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I happened upon a news article about Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, and it gave some insight into the side-view mirror he looks at himself in. Many consider Putin to be the wealthiest man in the world, with some estimates of his net worth being as high as \$200 billion (with a “b”). Putin, however, doesn’t feel embarrassed about his wealth; in 2008 he explained how he sees things: *As for my personal*

perception, I am not ashamed before the citizens who voted for me. All these eight years I worked like a galley slave, to spare no effort. I am happy with the results.

That's how he perceives himself – a galley slave. Four years later, in 2012, Boris Nemtsov (who incidentally was assassinated last week) wrote a sarcastic report called “The Life of a Galley Slave” in which he details the fleet of cars, planes and boats at Putin’s disposal and revealed that Putin owned 20 homes, 58 aircraft, and four yachts including a 176 foot vessel with a spa pool and a waterfall. Nemtsov attempted to inject a little reality into Putin’s perception of himself. Like a bad side view mirror, pride has a distorting effect on our perception of reality: *objects in mirror appear more centered around us than they really are.*

Let’s take a few minutes to consider two significant effects of pride on the Corinthian’s perception of themselves and how Paul seeks to correct that distortion:

- 1. They measured themselves by comparing and competing with each other**
- 2. They thought they had arrived spiritually**

- 1. They measured themselves by comparing and competing with each other**

6...that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another...7 what do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? Vv. 6-7

Two words that describe the atmosphere in the Corinthian church: puffed up and boasting. Out of the 7 times the Greek word for puffed up is used in the NT, 6 of those occurrences are in the book of 1st Corinthians. Excluding 2 Cor., the Greek words for “boast” or “boasting” is used 9 times in 1 Cor. as compared to 11 times in all Paul’s other books combined. The Corinthian church was boastful and puffed up by pride.

The word for “puffed up” which Paul uses almost exclusively with Corinthians comes from the word “air bellows” and it gives us a pretty good idea of how pride was operating in Corinth. The believers in Corinth could turn anything into a competition – a way that they could puff themselves up as bigger than the person next to them. I’m wiser than you, I’m more eloquent than you, I’m more spiritually mature than you, I have a more dynamic, impressive spiritual gift than you, I follow a better leader than you...They measured themselves by comparing and competing with each other. They were “puffed up in favor of one against the other.”

When we look through the side-view mirror of pride, we see ourselves in relation to those around us and we want to inflate ourselves to appear bigger than we really are. Pad our resume, boast about our accomplishments, hide our shortcomings, and just in general try to look like we’ve got it all together.

Or we try to cut other people down to size because we feel bigger when they look smaller. One of the reasons gossip is so tasty is because while we’re enjoying talking about someone else’s downfall or scandal or shortcomings we are able to divert attention away from our own sins and failures. It is escapism at its lowest form.

Why? Because pride has us measure ourselves – our worth and our identity – by how we compare to each other. CS Lewis makes the point that pride is essentially competitive. He writes: *We say that people*

are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud...

I don't have to be perfect – just better than you. My kids don't have to behave perfectly, just better than yours. We can even turn humility into a competition. *Hey, I don't know how to say this, but, I think I'm more humble than you.*

It's a toxic atmosphere in a church. A boastful church isn't a safe place to be weak. A church where everyone tries to look put together, isn't a safe place to fall apart. We need to remember that we are all lower tier rowers in Christ's service. That's our identity, that's our worth! We belong to Christ – that's our identity! - saved by his blood, adopted into his family, and conscripted into his service which is the highest honor and greatest life purpose possible. We aren't rowing in competition against each other; we're rowing together in cooperation with each other. That's what the church is: servants of Christ all rowing in the same direction. The way we serve will differ from person to person, but we're all rowing in the same direction and our worth is measured by our faithfulness, not our impressiveness. The second distortion Paul addresses is that...

2. They thought they had arrived spiritually Vv. 8-13

Paul contrasts their perception of themselves with the reality that the apostles lived in. They had everything they wanted! They were rich! They had become kings! They had arrived!

Paul and the apostles, on the other hand, were on a very different path. They were on display as last of all – men condemned to die, a humiliating spectacle for men and angels to gawk at. Continuing the contrast, Paul says, you are wise – we are fools for Christ's sake. You are strong – we are weak. You are held in honor – we are in disrepute.

There is a teaching in the church that sounds a lot like the Corinthian church. It promotes a here and now triumphalism: God wants us rich, ruling, victorious. The faith movement often teaches that if we're walking in all that God has for us, we'll be wealthy and healthy and victory in every category of life is assured. The wealth of the nations will be brought to us. If you have enough faith, your neighbor will have to give you his BMW in exchange for your Ford Fiesta. One of the oft-repeated biblical phrases of this teaching is Deut 28:13 - we are the head and not the tail. It's attractive because who doesn't want to be the head rather than the tail, the top rather than the bottom, rich rather than poor, king rather than peasant. It stokes something in us...our pride.

I've heard some even say that Paul didn't have enough faith – that's why he was poor and destitute and suffering the way he was. He could have had a rolex watch and a Rolls Royce if he had believed God a little more. That's not far from what some in the Corinthian church are saying: Paul's a loser, we're winners! Why do we need him?

Paul says, you say you've arrived and you have arrived. The problem is, you've arrived at the wrong place! He paints the picture of a Roman parade where the victors parade their captives through the city as a spectacle of defeat and then the conquered are thrown into the arena to be killed as sport while the crowds are entertained. Paul says to the Corinthians, we are in the arena as those condemned to die, you're sitting in the luxury box seats enjoying the show. You have arrived – at the wrong place! You're in the wrong seats.

Pride takes us down the path of self-glory; Christ leads us down the path of the cross. The goal isn't to promote ourselves but to die to ourselves. The objective isn't to beat our enemies but to love our enemies: *When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat.*

Christ calls us to see reality in a very different way than pride does. We share in the glory of Christ, not the glitter of the world. The world might see us as trash, scum of the world, but that doesn't crush our sense of identity or worth, it elevates it because, like Peter and John, we know that it is an honor to suffer shame for the sake of Jesus' name.

To be precise, the Corinthians are right about their destination, they just got there the wrong way and at the wrong time. In Christ we are rich, we do have all we could ever want, and we are going to rule and reign with him forever. But the Christian lives in a tension called the "already and the not yet". In one sense the kingdom of God has come. In another sense, it's not here yet – it's coming. There are aspects of our redemption that we enjoy already, and aspects that are not yet. The Corinthians were too much "already" and too little "not yet".

A father's correction (vv. 14-21)

Paul's point is actually pretty devastating! While Paul and other believers who are faithful to Christ's name are on display in the gladiator's arena, the Corinthians are sitting in seats of honor ordering popcorn. Suddenly what's honorable and what's shameful are flipped. But Paul didn't write this to devastate the Corinthian believers with shame but to correct them as beloved children. Paul has a father's heart towards them – he considers himself a father to them because he led them to Christ and helped establish them in their faith. There will be many teachers, but you won't have many fathers. The appeal is clear: listen to my voice. Hear my heart.

Like any good father, he is willing to bring loving but strong discipline. Look with me again at verse 18: *Some are arrogant...* That word is the word "puffed up". There are some people in Corinth who are puffed up with arrogance and are instigating the division, stirring up the pride, and undermining Paul in the eyes of his spiritual children. They are all about perpetuating the toxic atmosphere in the church and so Paul warns them: I will come soon, and I will confront these puffed up talkers and we'll see what they are made of. I'm not worried about their puffed up, arrogant words, I will come in the power of the kingdom and I will test their power.

And so he asks them: should I come with a rod to discipline you or can I come in a spirit of gentleness? Either way I'll come in love, but what will you need? He is appealing to them to repent of their arrogance and receive his correction from afar. But, like any good father, he will come prepared to deal with the troublemakers in the church.

Conclusion:

Let's conclude with this thought: we all have blind spots – areas where pride distorts our perception of reality. I do, and you do. We need friends and teachers who love us enough to speak hard truth to us. Who love us enough to correct our perception with God's word. It's jumping ahead, but the Corinthians will end up taking Paul's strong correction to heart and humbling themselves, to his great joy.

The word of God gives us a clear and accurate view of reality: we belong to Christ, we have been purchased by his blood, with great love he has adopted us into his family, and he has conscripted into his great service. The deeper these truths soak into our hearts and grip our souls, the more we will see the

Letter to a Really Messed Up Church
Allen Snapp
Grace Community Church
March 8, 2015

emptiness of boasting and puffing ourselves up. Our greatest joy will be found, not in honoring ourselves, but in honoring Christ, and serving him together.