

“SEEING CLEARLY IN THE MIRROR”

Scriptures: Selected Proverbs; Luke 14:7-11

There is a poster you may have seen of a woman dressed in a business suit holding a coffee cup. Her little finger is cocked daintily to the side of the cup and her face portrays a look of utter self-assurance. What she does not realize is that her slip just has collapsed around her ankles. The caption reads, "Confidence is what you have before you understand the situation."

According to Proverbs pride is what you have before you understand the situation—before you realize how messed up you are.

Proverbs 11:2—“When pride comes, then comes disgrace.”

Proverbs 16:18—“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

The problem is that pride blinds us to ourselves. Like the woman with the collapsed slip, we do not see ourselves as other people see us, which means we have a hard time making the changes in ourselves that we need to make.

C. S. Lewis comments on this in his book *Mere Christianity*, in a chapter called “The Greatest Sin.” He writes,

There is one vice of which no man is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. ... The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit. ... Pride leads to every other vice: it the completely anti-God state of mind. ... Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. 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 every one 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: the pleasure of being above the rest (pp. 108-110).

Do you see how pride could be a barrier to your enjoyment of God’s kingdom? In God’s kingdom we will all be equal recipients of God’s grace. We will all be undeserving beneficiaries of the joy, peace, and blessing of eternal life. If your goal in life is to be better than others, you might not enjoy that very much.

C. S. Lewis goes on,

Other vices may sometimes bring people together: you may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken people or unchaste people. But Pride always means enmity—it *is* enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God. ... A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you (p. 111).

Interestingly, this very chapter from *Mere Christianity*—this section I just read about pride—was the turning point in the life of Charles Colson, the former White House Counsel for President Nixon. In the days when the Watergate scandal was moving up the ranks of the Nixon White House, Chuck Colson went to visit a friend named Tom Phillips. Phillips gave Colson this book, *Mere Christianity*, but before handing it to him, he read the chapter I just quoted, the chapter on pride. In his autobiography Chuck Colson writes,

Just as a man about to die is supposed to see flash before him sequence by sequence, the high points of his life, so, as Tom's voice read on that August evening, the key events in my life paraded before me as if projected on a screen ... the clawing and straining for status and position—"Mr. Colson, the President is calling—Mr. Colson, the President wants to see you right away."

For some reason I thought of an incident after the 1972 election when a reporter, an old Nixon nemesis, came by my office and contritely asked what he could do to get in the good graces of the White House. I suggested that he try "slashing his wrists." I meant it as a joke, of course, but also to make him squirm. It was the arrogance of the victor over an enemy brought to submission.

Now, sitting there on the dimly lit porch, my self-centered past was washing over me in waves. It was painful. Agony. Desperately I tried to defend myself. What about my sacrifices for government service, the giving up of a big income, putting my stocks into a blind trust? The truth, I saw in an instant, was that I'd wanted the position in the White House more than I'd wanted money. ... I would eagerly have given up everything I'd ever earned to prove myself at the mountaintop of government. It was pride—Lewis' "great sin"—that propelled me through life (*Born Again*, pp. 124-125).

Notice how Chuck Colson rationalized his ambition as public service and his obsession with power as necessary for serving his country. That was the rationale for almost everyone involved in the Watergate break-in. To a person they justified their illegal acts as necessary for serving the public good. Like justifying torture or human rights abuses in the name of security.

Proverbs 16:2 says, "All one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit." People have an unlimited ability to rationalize, to justify even their most self-centered actions. Look at Proverbs 16:25—"Sometimes there is a way that seems to be right, but in the end it is the way to death." Or Proverbs 21:2—"All deeds are right in the sight of the doer, but the Lord weighs the heart."

Chuck Colson was right in his own eyes until he met Tom Phillips and C. S. Lewis. Tom Phillips, with help from C. S. Lewis, held up a mirror to Chuck Colson that allowed him to see himself more clearly, and according to Proverbs, that is what we all need:

Proverbs 12:1—"Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but those who hate to be rebuked are stupid."

Proverbs 15:12—"Scoffers do not like to be rebuked; they will not go to the wise."

Pride blinds us to our own short-comings and makes us incapable of changing in the ways we need to change. The only cure for that is when other people hold up a mirror to us, a mirror by which we can see ourselves as other people see us, and as God sees us.

I figure that's why God gave us spouses. And why God gave pastors parishioners. I once heard a story about an elderly church member who shook the pastor's hand after the service and said, "Pastor, I so appreciate your sermons. Each one is better than the next." Another person greeted the pastor after church by saying, "Pastor, that sermon was simply superfluous." Deciding to play along, the pastor said, "Thank you. I am planning to have it published posthumously." The church member replied, "Good, the sooner the better."

You know what? We need people like that in our lives. We need people who break through our pride and conceit, who hold up a mirror and help us see how deeply we need God's transforming grace. Proverbs says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." All your ways may be pure in your own eyes, but if you allow God to work in your life through other people and through the Holy Spirit, you can be set straight.

- Ken Onstot