

This Subtle Danger Disguises Itself as Spiritual Maturity

I'm not sure when I became spiritually mature, but it happened without me noticing. I simply loved the Bible because it gave me glimpses of the Living God. As my love for God grew, so did an insatiable appetite for all 66 books of His Spirit-breathed Word.

Then, somewhere along the way, others began to solicit my opinion on every topic under the sun, because I was suddenly "full of spiritual wisdom." I began to be the one who taught the Bible studies rather than attending them. I was more often the mentor than the mentee.

This is all as it should be. It isn't surprising that those who love God's Word are often sought out for advice. Psalm 1 tells us that the one who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night will be like a tree planted by streams of water yielding fruit in its season. Proverbs 1 reminds us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. But a new temptation arose in the subtle shift from learner to teacher, one I didn't foresee.

The Temptation to Use God

I didn't begin this journey to know God because it would make me a wise person or make me impressive in the eyes of others. I wanted to know God because He is amazing—and who wouldn't want to know Him? But as I looked around and noticed that others were impressed or came to me for advice, something began to change. I enjoyed the new attention and affirmation I got from others for my knowledge of God and His Word. Pride began to creep in through an unexpected door: delighting in my own expertise of God, rather than God Himself.

This slow fade into pride is the pursuit of a cheap, second-rate joy—a joy in our own abilities to know God. In our pursuit, we cease to learn about God because He is enjoyable, beautiful and glorious, and instead seek Him because it impresses others. Just like the childhood friends of rising stars often betray intimate knowledge to the magazines just to make a buck, we may find ourselves using our knowledge of God to better our own standing with others.

I'm exposing this dangerous pride primarily because it poses such a threat to my own love for God. I wonder if you also see the temptation within yourself.

The Pharisees and the Promise of Exposure

In the Gospels, Jesus regularly pulls back the cloak of pious activity to reveal the Pharisees' proud hearts. We see in them that this temptation to use God had drawn them in and taken root. They loved their interpretations of Scripture more than the one of whom the Scriptures spoke. They studied the law, not for love of the lawgiver, but because of the benefits it gave them. They taught the Word to others, not because they longed for others to know their great God, but to exercise authority and power over them.

Just like the Pharisees, when we enjoy our own cleverness in knowing God more than God Himself, we have guaranteed our eventual hypocrisy. And just like them, I have often been a hypocrite, in ways that others likely couldn't see. I was able to continue doing ministry, saying and doing the right things, while my heart was puffed up with pride.

But hallelujah! God does not leave us as we are. If we are truly born again, He has given us His Spirit, and in His kindness, He will expose us (a promise I cling to tighter every day).

God's exposure in my life feels like the splashing of water on my face, waking up my lethargic soul from the hypnotic lure

toward spiritual arrogance. One such incident was the encouragement of a sister in Christ who is some years younger than I am. I have been her small group leader, mentor and friend. It matters little what was said, only that my heart revolted from being exhorted by this sister in Christ whom I have deemed younger than me in every way.

As I felt indignation rise to conscious awareness, I knew I had been lured away again from the purity and simplicity of devotion to Christ. That somewhat painful moment provided my way of escape from the pride. His exposure was an offer to return to Him in repentance and to rest in Christ's finished work.

Fighting for Humility

While God will expose us, are there things we can do to resist this temptation? How can we protect ourselves from this ever-present danger? How can we discern when our spiritual disciplines begin to be motivated by a desire to be the most spiritual person in the room? Let me share a few ways I am fighting for a posture of humility and a pure devotion to Christ.

1. Repent

Repentance is not a bad thing to be avoided. It is a call to return to God, and as sinners it ought to be the daily posture of our hearts. See repentance not as a proof of failure but an invitation to return home. When temptation creeps in, cry out to God and run to Him.

2. Meditate

Spiritual arrogance quickly turns the study of God's Word into a search for something tweetable. Like missing a sunset because we ran off to tell others about it, we may easily miss opportunities to enjoy God in His Word because we're too obsessed with telling others. Choosing to meditate and mull

over what I read gives my heart time to soak in the reality of who God is and what I am learning about Him. It gives me time to respond to God and reminds me to not just be content to learn about Him but to talk to Him!

3. Study for Fun

I do love teaching others about God and hope you do, too. But the more opportunities I get to teach, the easier it is to turn my Bible reading and prayer into the means, not the end goal. Of course, I need to get into the Word and seek God to prepare for the next article, Bible study or speaking event. But if that's the only time I go to Him, knowing God becomes a job, not a joy. Now I make it a priority to always be studying books of the Bible that I'm not preparing to teach about. Study for fun. Search out God's character in His Word simply because He's amazing and has invited you to know Him.

4. Remain a Humble Learner

I was a young, junior high student when God opened my eyes to His Word. I found in the Bible a God beyond my imagination and ached to know more. I cared little about how much I knew or didn't know but was simply thrilled that there was more to know and that I could know it. What joy! Now, by His grace, I pray to remain as lowly as I began: a humble learner. I do not have the market on the Word of God. His Spirit can just as easily illuminate the Scriptures to whomever He wishes; no seniority rules apply. I pray I will always be excited to learn from others around me who love God, no matter how young in age or how new to the faith.

We will never be satisfied with anything other than God Himself. Being an expert on God and His Word is a poor substitute and still just a broken cistern that cannot hold water (Jer. 2:13). As we grow in maturity, teach others, offer wisdom and find ourselves the mentor more than the mentee, may we fight diligently for joy in God alone. {eo}

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