

A Humble Warning to the Spiritually Proud Preacher

✖ The first and worst cause of error that prevails in our day is spiritual pride.

So said Jonathan Edwards, a preacher, theologian and missionary to Native Americans who lived in the 1700s. Edwards went on to say that spiritual pride is 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 a work of God. Powerful words!

If that was true in Edwards' day—and it was—then how much more is it true in our day?

Think about it for a minute. In Edwards' era, there were no megachurches, no Facebook pages where charismatic preachers could woo millions of “fans,” no global satellites to broadcast prosperity messages to the masses, and no Hollywood Christianity with all its trappings. In Edwards' era, rather, Europeans were fleeing to North America, in part, to gain freedom from oppressive religious systems.

Recognizing Spiritual Pride

Again, if spiritual pride was a stark reality in Edwards' day, how much more is it true in our era? Oh, if Edwards could only see us today ...

In the modern church world, we see spiritual pride because of position, spiritual pride because of prominence, spiritual pride because of popularity ... even if it's only position, prominence and popularity in a small local church. To be sure, the spiritually proud preacher doesn't need a large kingdom to call his own in order to feel superior.

The spiritually proud man sees himself as more discerning, more anointed, more eloquent, more revelatory, more important and, otherwise, well, more spiritual than you. Some of the ways spiritual pride manifests include self-righteousness, hypercritical attitudes, hypocrisy, scorning correction or guidance, putting on pretenses, and false humility.

Of course, God hates pride in any form, but I believe spiritual pride is the worst manifestation. It's so deceptive that the one who walks in spiritual pride is too proud to consider that he may be suffering from this deplorable disease. In fact, spiritual pride mistakes the favor of man for the favor of God.

Let's be clear: Just because people fall down and vibrate on the floor after the preacher lays hands on them doesn't mean God is pleased with the preacher's heart attitude. The Spirit moves in response to the faith in the hearts of hungry people who come looking for God. Even miracles, signs and wonders don't validate a spiritually proud pastor's stance. It may take years or even decades, but make no mistake: if the spiritually proud man does not repent God will eventually bring him low.

God Won't Share His Glory

Now, there is a danger even greater than the spiritually proud preacher who looks down on others—it's the spiritually proud preacher who takes God's glory for himself. When this happens, I believe the disease Edwards mentioned becomes morbid. See, God will not give His glory to another (Isaiah 48:11). He just won't.

Consider Nebuchadnezzar. By the grace of God the Babylonian king grew and became strong—his greatness reached to the heavens and his dominion to the end of the earth (Dan. 4:20). Yet Nebuchadnezzar let spiritual pride into his heart. Daniel warned him to “break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor” (Dan. 4:27). But

the proud king ignored the humble prophet.

A year later, Nebuchadnezzar was walking about the royal palace of Babylon when he said, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my might and power and for the honor of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30). No sooner did those words depart from his mouth did Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom depart from him. He wound up dwelling with the beasts of the field, eating grass. God gave Nebuchadnezzar a space to repent. But eventually God cut off the flow of spiritual pride when Nebuchadnezzar tried to take His glory.

Then there's King Herod. Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus, the king's personal aide, their friend, they asked for peace because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. So on a set day by Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, he sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not a man!" Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God (Acts 12:20-24). King Herod had moved in pride for decades, but God's grace eventually ran out.

Curing Spiritual Pride

By contrast, humble servants of the Lord do not take God's glory for themselves. When Peter entered the home of Cornelius, a centurion who had invited him to share the gospel in his home fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man" (Acts 10:25-26). Peter knew better than to touch God's glory. In humility, he stood there and preached the gospel to the gentiles, reasoning that God is no respecter of persons and many were saved to the glory of God.

In Lystra, Paul and Barnabus faced a similar situation. When Paul observed that a man who was crippled from birth had faith to be healed, he told the man to stand up on his feet. The

healing power of God met him at the point of his faith and healed him. When the people of Lystra saw what happened, they called Paul Hermes and Barnabas Zeus and intended to sacrifice an oxen to them.

“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, ‘Men, why are you doing these things? We are also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea and all things that are in them’” (Acts 14:14-15).

Paul could have chosen to take the glory for himself; instead he would end up getting stoned. People thought they had killed him, but God had another plan for a man who refused to take His glory.

Edwards concluded that until the disease of spiritual pride is cured, medicines are applied in vain to heal all other diseases. The good news is spiritual pride can be cured. The prescription is strong dose of conviction, repentance and humility—and I might say an ongoing effort to cooperate with the grace of God to walk in the fear of the Lord.

It’s interesting to note that Edwards is credited with playing a key role in the First Great Awakening. While there’s plenty of talk about another Great Awakening and a healing of our land, I believe any widespread move of God is going to start with you and with me. We need to work with the Holy Spirit to root out spiritual pride and walk in humility so that we are prepared when God answers our cries to “show me Your glory.”

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