

Don't You Know or Understand Even Yet? Sunday, 1/31/21

Have you ever made the connection between pride and faith? John Wesley saw pride as the basis of all sin and had these words of advice to those who would stay grounded in their Christian faith: “The first advice I would give those who have been saved from sin by grace is to watch and pray continually against pride. For it is pride not only to ascribe what we have to ourselves, but also to think we have what we do not.”¹

Wesley wasn't talking about the kind of healthy pride we take in our good work, but rather the kind of pride that is exactly opposite of Godly humility. Pride is imagining that the good in our life originates from us or other people rather than from God. Or, as Wesley noted, pride can also involve pretending that we don't carry flaws in our knowledge, temperament, attitudes, and actions. But it's the first kind of pride that we're looking at today, or rather it's opposite, humility. Humility lies at the root of all genuine faith, and its pride that most often derails it.

Jana and I were watching the most recent season of the Great British Baking Show, which is actually a great series to watch if you want to watch the train wrecks that can come about when pride is on the line. All season long we were told that one contestant's expertise was French Patisserie, but when Patisserie Week finally rolled around, it turned out to be her undoing. On one of the episodes this season, the contestants had to make this, a Danish Cornucopia, or horn of plenty. It was their technical challenge, the one the contestants had to bake without any practice and a bare minimum of instructions. It's the perfect metaphor for our first text from Deuteronomy, because it symbolizes the danger in prosperity. The cornucopia has long been a symbol of prosperity, which is why it's featured in so many Thanksgiving centerpieces. Let's just say that the cornucopias produced by the contestants were a far cry from this one, monuments more to the difficulty of the challenge rather than their baking skills. I'm pretty sure that part of the appeal of the show is in seeing other people struggle with their baking in the same ways you and I do!

God warned the Israelites as they prepared to move into the promised land that it wasn't the Canaanites that they had to worry about, but the emergence of their own pride,

¹ <https://marlenagraves.com/a-warning-about-pride-john-wesley/>

fooling themselves that their prosperity in the promised land was the result of their own goodness rather than God's. And the result? Over and over again, what was meant to be a blessed horn of plenty wound up turning into a pile of underproved dough and melted chocolate.

In 1Samuel, we read that "Obedience is better than sacrifice."² And that, after all, was what God wanted most from His people- to keep His commandments. Over and over again, God's Word contains the phrase "Do not forget!" or "remember!" But ultimately it's not the forgetting that's the problem, is it? Do we really "forget" that it's God's grace that gives us life, or is it something else that keeps us from obeying? I think that it's pride that leads us into rationalizations that end up short-circuiting our obedience to God's will and our recognition that we are utterly dependent on the grace of God. It happened over and over again to God's people in the Old Testament. Let's see how it played out for the pharisees and the first disciples of Jesus. I'm reading from the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, beginning with verse 11, in the New Living Translation.

{Read Mark 8:11-21 NLT}

Did he feel the deep disappointment of Jesus? He didn't just sigh in response to the Pharisees. He "sighed deeply in his spirit!"³ It reminds me of that famous expression of Charlie Brown: "Good grief!" I love this moment in the Gospel, because it's another glimpse into the humanity of Jesus. Jesus became frustrated, perhaps even exasperated, just like we do.

And then Jesus did what he occasionally did when he determined that it simply wasn't going to be fruitful to continue the discussion any further. "He got back into the boat and left them."⁴ The question is, why was Jesus so perturbed. After all, wasn't he basically on tour with his teachings and miracles, freely distributing signs wherever he went? Why didn't he simply whip up another miracle for them to end the debate?

Let's dig a little deeper and see if we can uncover the problem. There are indications in this text that link it back to Mark 3, where the Pharisees confronted Jesus after he healed

² 1Samuel 15:22. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

³ Mark 8:12. Ibid

⁴ Mark 8:13. Ibid.

people by driving demons from them. Instead of accepting these healing miracles as a sign from God, the Pharisees accused Jesus of being in league with Satan! In other words, when the Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, they weren't just asking for another miracle, but rather some incontrovertible proof from God that would satisfy their persistent doubts. Can you see the problem here? The Pharisees approached Jesus with a basic starting point of hostile unbelief. Jesus was guilty until proven innocent, and since the Almighty coming into creation as a man wasn't sufficient proof for them, their hearts were obviously too hard to accept Jesus, no matter what miraculous proof he offered them. Thank goodness Jesus had his faithful disciples to turn to, right? Wrong!

The disciples, who should have known better, proved to be just as dense as the Pharisees. Jesus was preparing them to be builders of the Kingdom of Heaven, but they were spiritual toddlers, playing with the blocks instead of preparing the foundations of the Kingdom.

In the boat, Jesus tried to warn them about the hard-hearted unbelief of the Pharisees, saying, "Watch out! Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees!"⁵ But they still didn't understand that Jesus was trying to teach them a spiritual truth. It reminds me of my seminary years in Wilmore, KY, where some at the College were still trying to legislate righteousness by enforcing rules about wearing shorts on campus and dancing in public. After extensive travel with Jesus, witnessing his teaching and miracles, the disciples should have been insiders, people in-the-know. Instead of seeking to deepen their faith and spiritual insight, they were arguing about who forgot the bread- focusing on material politics instead of spiritual dynamics. Thankfully, Jesus didn't treat them the same way he did the Pharisees, sighing deeply and then leaving them behind in the boat!

When Jesus asked them, "Don't you understand yet?", what did he have in mind? Nothing short of his identity, purpose, and his call on their lives. As the King of Kings, Messiah, the Great I Am, Jesus called them to respond to himself, the ultimate revelation and sign from God. And the call of Jesus was and is quite clear: Faith that is rooted in hope rather than proof, and radical discipleship that builds on that faith to transform the world into

⁵ Mark 8:15. Ibid

the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Can you see why Jesus was so exasperated? What more could he do to spell it out for the disciples? What more does he have to do to spell it out for each one of us? “Don’t you know or understand even yet? Are your hearts too hard to take it in? ‘You have eyes—can’t you see? You have ears—can’t you hear?’ Don’t you remember anything at all?”⁶

Are you still waiting for a sign from God? Perhaps you’re trying to answer the wrong question. God does care about our struggles in this life, but we exist to serve God, and not the other way around. And we are far from lacking the signs we need about Jesus, God, and our purpose as individuals and the church. Paul put it quite plainly in the first chapter of Romans: “For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.”⁷ But we have so much more than the revelation of creation. It’s actually embarrassing how much we know about God’s character, God’s purposes, and God’s will through the life of Jesus, through God’s Word, through the generations of Christians who came before us, and our own experiences. Like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, we haven’t “forgotten” about God or God’s commandments. God’s plans and expectations aren’t shrouded in impenetrable spiritual mysteries. Our unbelieving hearts are simply too hard, and so our ears don’t hear and our eyes don’t see.

The good news is that it’s not too late to soften your heart and shelve your unbelief. You could start by putting away your expectation of that sign you’ve been waiting for and turn to one of the signs you already have, your Bible. Don’t have one? Talk to me and I’ll give you one! Paul also wrote in Romans that “faith comes from hearing,”⁸ so even worshipping with us today is a good start.

Have you set out your “two chairs” yet for morning prayer, one for you and one for Jesus? I’m going to keep asking you, so why don’t you do it today? Faith also comes by spending time with Jesus, who is, after all, the subject of our faith all along.

⁶ Mark 8:17-18. Ibid

⁷ Romans 1:20. Ibid

⁸ Romans 10:17 Ibid

Jesus wants us to follow him, but in order to follow him, first we have to get to know him. To know him we have to begin to understand him, and in order to do that, we need a soft, yielding heart that's inclined to trust him and ready to learn from him. And the best way to do that is to simply spend time with him. A lifetime is made up of years and months, each month is made up of weeks, each week made up of days, and each day is filled with moments of "now" that you can choose to draw close to Jesus. Do you still not understand?

Please take some time now to reflect on your faith. What "sign?" are you waiting for? If you like, please share a comment or a prayer.



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