

21 Questions: Am I Proud? Sunday, 9/23/18

1 Today we're continuing to explore what it means for us to be Jesus followers in the 21st century. Not just church attenders and members, but sold-out, Spirit-filled followers of the Lord of Life! Not just people who know about Jesus, but people who walk with Jesus every day. We were made, gifted, and called for so much more than just going through the motions of doing church. Everything that we're about in this life vitally depends on the answer to one question: "Is Jesus real to me?"

This month we're answering that question by asking 21 questions that John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, first asked. "Can I be trusted? Am I enjoying prayer? Did the Bible live in me today?" Wesley's 21 questions will help us to honestly and specifically challenge ourselves to grow spiritually. If you haven't yet received one of the take-home cards with Wesley's 21 questions, you'll find one in plastic card holder on the back of the pew in front of you. Take it home and use it during this season of spiritual growth. Use it as a bookmark in your Bible, put it on the kitchen table for a family conversation over breakfast or dinner, or put it on the nightstand by your bed. My prayer is that by the end of our series, each of us can say that Jesus is more real to us than ever.

2 How many of you have at least heard of the musical, Hamilton? Were any of you fortunate enough to get tickets for one of the shows in Minneapolis this week? Jana and I sang along to the soundtrack for more than a year before managing to catch a showing of it in Chicago. The show is built mostly on historical fact, so I don't think I'll be spoiling anything for you by saying that the story is a dramatic portrayal of two flawed heroes of the American Revolution, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, both of whom helped shape America but allowed their pride to destroy each other and themselves.

How many great novels, plays, and musicals revolve around the tragic outcomes of letting our pride get the best of us? Pride and Prejudice, Frankenstein, Macbeth, just to name a few. Ever since Adam and Eve tried to seize knowledge that was reserved for God in the Garden of Eden, pride has been at the root of our worst attitudes and behaviors. James and John were hardly the last followers of Jesus who struggled with it. And so when we ask

¹ Sermon series concept adapted from Adam Hamilton, COR

ourselves the question, “Am I proud?,” there’s a tremendous weight of history and meaning behind that question, a vast story of the relationship between God and God’s people, far beyond the relatively short stories we have to tell of our own wrestling with pride. Abraham, Moses, David, and countless other heroes of the faith all struggled to come to grips with their pride. With such a long history of flawed heroes, can there be any hope for ordinary people like you and me?

The answer is yes. There is always hope in the good news of Jesus Christ for those willing to receive it. It doesn’t matter how many times you’ve let your pride lead you to a fall- there is hope for you. It doesn’t matter how many broken relationships you’re weighed down by because of the unwavering pride of either yourself or someone else- there is hope for you. It doesn’t matter if you’re living in the grips of an addiction that you’re too proud to admit to- there’s hope for you as well. There are as many varieties of sin associated with pride as there are people on this planet, but really only one solution, one source of hope. Long before we were born, the Apostle Paul wrote about this hope to the church in Ephesus. I’m reading now from Ephesians, chapter 2, beginning in the 4th verse of the Message paraphrase.

{Read Ephesians 2:4-10 (MSG)}.

3 Since any hope we have of getting a grip on our pride problem comes from God, the obvious starting point is to begin an intentional journey of surrendering your life to God’s desires. For some of you, simply showing up today is a good start. If that’s you, and you’re still searching and trying to figure out if this Jesus thing is real, I’m glad you’re here. Keep seeking God in worship, and please know that I always have time to talk and pray with you about your journey.

For others of you, you believe in Jesus, but you’ve never completed that first step of surrender that Jesus modeled for us- baptism. Whether we’re baptized as an infant or an adult, in a river or with water sprinkled in a church, the meaning is the same. In baptism, we allow ourselves to go completely under the spiritual water of God, dying to a life that revolves around our prideful egos and then rising up again, reborn to a life that is centered on the Spirit of Christ dwelling within us, the community of Christ around us, and the world in which we act out that Spirit in love. Have you been baptized? It doesn’t matter how old

you are, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to have a conversation with you about baptizing you or your children.

Some of you were baptized as infants but never owned that faith for yourselves. Our youth confirm their baptismal vows through our Confirmation program, and if you were here last week for the 8:15 Confirmation service, you received a blessing of water, inviting you to remember your baptism. Remembering your baptism means remembering that your life was offered into God's hands, and God has a purpose and a plan for your life today. I'm seriously pondering the possibility of an adult Confirmation program for those who were never confirmed, or for those who simply want to be in a setting where you can honestly explore the essentials of what you believe. Please talk to me after church if that's something that might help you along on your journey toward dying to self and living to Christ.

4 I'd guess that the majority of us are somewhere in the murky middle of our spiritual journeys. We've been baptized. We've joined the church and reaffirmed our faith. We worship, we pray, we struggle to be better people by loving each other and our neighbors. But all too often we allow our pride to defeat us, sabotaging our best intentions and that which we know to be God's best for our relationship with God and others. Why is that? Perhaps we're trying to live in the impossible tension of having one foot in God's Kingdom and the other foot firmly planted in our own prideful reality. C.S. Lewis described this predicament perfectly in his book, *Mere Christianity*, where he wrote: *It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.*² In other words, this new reality we've been reborn into, this epic adventure of being transformed from the inside out into the joyful and loving image of Jesus- it's an all-in thing! While some of our suffering comes from living in a broken world- natural disasters, gene mutations, violent crime, and the like- at least some of our day to day suffering comes from living in the awful tension between what we know to be God's will and what our own will is for our lives. We're all like eggs, and we have to choose between hatching and going bad.

² Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*.

5 So what are we to do, those of us caught in the tug of war between selfish pride and selfless humility? John Wesley offers this basic advice that is still profoundly helpful: *The first advice I would give those who have been saved from sin by grace is to watch and pray continually against pride...We often think we have no need of anyone's advice or reproof. Always remember, much grace does not imply much enlightenment... One way to do this is to own any fault we have. If you have at any time thought, spoken, or acted wrong, do not refrain from acknowledging it. Never dream that this will hurt the cause of God--in fact, it will further it. Be open and honest when you are rebuked and do not seek to evade it or disguise it. Rather, let it appear just as it is and you will thereby not hinder but adorn the gospel.*³

If we're honest, that advice doesn't come as much of a surprise. Victory comes by being transparent about our shortcomings, in the little things as well as the big things, and acknowledging our utter dependence on God. It's in the day by day, hour by hour moments that we choose to cooperate with God's Spirit, or we choose to serve our pride; we choose the path of arrogant self-righteousness or the path of humble, Christ-righteousness; we choose to let go of the rope, or we pull even harder until the rope breaks. Wesley's question, "Am I proud," really has less to do with who you're destined to be, so much as the many accumulated ways that you've made choices each day to be prideful or humble.

6 There are so many practical ways for us to choose humility over arrogance. There's even a "Wiki-How" page with some of them.⁴ Stop yourself from talking first and choose to listen instead. Ask questions instead of offering opinions. Give credit to others. Apologize, acknowledging what you did wrong and what you're going to do to make things right. Avoid bragging. Take the last place in line. Ask for and accept help. Compliment someone else. Give thanks to God in all things.

Your challenge this week is to examine the ways you may be letting pride overshadow the image of Christ in your life. Then resolve to take at least one practical step toward letting go of your pride and being reborn into the freedom of being fully alive in the Spirit.

³ Wesley, John. Selection from *Christian Perfection*, cited in *Devotional Classics*, pp. 258-259.

⁴ <https://www.wikihow.com/Practice-Humility>



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...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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