

“Giving Up Pride”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in week three of our “Give It Up” series; a series in which we're looking at some of things God has called us (in our lives) to give up, as well as what he wants to fill us with (and to give us) in its place.

In contrast to what often happens during the season of Lent, when people decide to “give up things” as a reminder of what Jesus gave up for us, the things we're taking on (in this series) are things we're called to give up, not just for a season, but for our entire lives.

Today we're taking on the topic of pride, this idea of thinking that somehow, for whatever reason, we are either better or closer or (more right) with God because of who we are or what we've done.

Let's start today with a quick assessment of where we're at, I don't know where we're at, but let's start with an assessment. If you're proud of something you've accomplished...the completion of a project, a task...something you thought you might not be able to do, but you did, and there's a sense of pride. Anyone proud of an accomplishment in your life? (Raise your hand.)

Alright, there's some pride in this room around differing accomplishments. (I'm not surprised.) Collectively, this is an accomplished group of people. I'm proud of some of what I've accomplished over the years, as well. (No question.)

How about when it comes to your family? Is anyone proud of what's going on in your family...proud of your kids, proud of who they've become (they're becoming), a sense of pride around the things you value, the years you've had together with your spouse? Raise your hand if there's anything in your family of which you are proud.

Alright, same thing. There's quite a bit of pride when it comes to our families. (I'm proud of my family, too.) I take pride in who we are (as a family) and how we use our lives. It's all good.

Alright, last one. This is even more specific. It relates to what's happening here today, on this day of confirmation for a number of our students. Is anyone proud of being a believer? Does anyone take pride in being called (by God) as you are, and (in your) living and growing as a follower of Christ? Raise your hand if you're proud, in any way, of what you believe and who you are as a child of God.

I'm glad to see it...and, again, I'm not surprised. As Christians, we should take great pride in who we are, what we represent, what God has done for us in Jesus.

I am proud to be a Christian. I really am. I take great pride in being chosen to live in and to represent Christ. We all should. Just think about it: the God of the universe has called and chosen us (in his Son) to live for him. I am proud of that calling and you should be, too.

And so what's this idea of giving up pride, of letting go of our pride and not wanting it (in our lives) to have a place? Let's turn to our text and see what we find.

The passage we read today, from Luke's gospel, one of those four (good news stories) of Jesus' life, is one that sets (in contrast) two very different and (you might even say) opposite kinds of people.

The first was a religious man, a Pharisee, a man who made his living (his career) in serving God. He was (for the most part) a respected man (in society), like a pastor might be today. Now the Pharisees weren't pastors. They were somewhat of a separate group, known (more for) their meticulous (even to a fault) keeping of the laws and commands of God. But they were respected.

The second man was much different, almost the opposite. In our story, he's referred to as a tax collector. Other translations call him a “publican.” A publican was a Jewish tax collector, one who collected taxes (from

the Jews) to give to the Romans. And so, to be a tax collector (or a publican), in Jesus' day, was not a noteworthy calling. But that's who this second man was, a publican.

And so what happens? They come to the temple. (You heard the story.) The Pharisee stood up and prayed, thanking God that he was not like so many others, especially like this tax collector who was robbing the people in his trade. But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his head, praying that God would have mercy on one who was such a sinner.

Do you remember what Jesus says at the end? Do you remember how this story closes? Do you remember the context (and the occasion) for this story?

The context and the occasion, the reason Jesus told this story (in the first place) was 100% in line with what happens at the end. At the beginning, Jesus tells it because (as Luke tells us), "there were some (in the crowd that day) who were confident of their own righteousness (before God) and who (as a result) of their self-confidence, looked down on everyone else." They were pride-filled. They were filled (more than anything) with themselves.

And that's why, at the end, the ending is almost 100% in line with where it all starts. Jesus says, "I tell you that this man (the tax collector, the publican, the one whose profession was anything but just), rather than the other, this man went home justified (made right) before God. Because everyone who exalts himself (Jesus says) will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

"Giving Up Pride." Have you ever noticed (in the Christian life), how so many things that seem right-side-up, ended up being upside-down? Have you ever noticed how so many things seen (in the eyes of the world) end up being seen (so much differently) in the eyes of God?

As I think about this story and about the application of it for us, I can't help but think that the concern Jesus had (in this story) was not with the issue of pride. (I don't believe it was.) Pride was not the issue for Jesus. Pride, (in itself) in that Pharisee's life, was not what was at the heart of our Lord's concern. His concern was with what that pride did. His concern was with what that pride caused.

Because, what did it do? For starters, it stood in the way of this man's relationship with God. (That's what it did.) There was no repentance in his heart. There was no outward (or inward) recognition of his need. All there was, was an inflated self-image. All there was, was an incomplete picture of what was actually the case. That's all there was.

And what did it cause? What it caused, (if nothing else), was a division between two people, (a sense of one-upmanship) between two individuals for whom our Lord would eventually die. Both in need of the forgiveness of God, both in need of what only God could offer, but one thinking, (for whatever reason), that his need was not as great.

Turn to your neighbor (for a moment) and take a good look. Go ahead, turn and look at the person sitting next to in your row. Do you think you're better (in the eyes of God) than the one sitting next to you in this church? Do you think you're more acceptable to God than that one (sitting next to you) who has already (in Jesus) been accepted?

This whole idea of pride (when it's falsely placed) is so contrary to the Christian faith. This whole idea of being better than someone else (in the eyes of God) is so far-removed from what's actually the case.

Turn back the clock to the 1960s and 70s. As an example, I still remember the story of Muhammad Ali after he had just won another boxing title. Now, a lot of it (in his life) was for show. I realize that. And, most likely, it had little, if anything, to do with God. But I still remember; a somewhat humorous story.

He was flying back to his hometown after a big fight...world champion, on top of the boxing world. They were getting ready to takeoff. The stewardess asked him to fasten his seat belt. (Do you know what he said?) He said, "Superman doesn't need a seat belt." (Do you know what the stewardess said?) She said, "Superman doesn't need an airplane, either; please fasten your belt."

We laugh when we hear it in that context. We cringe when we actually see it happening in others. What's hard to see is when it's happening in us.

One writer has said that pride is like the tires on your car. Underinflated, and they cause greater wear and tear, and they overheat. Overinflated, and they lose their traction and fail to function as they should.

It's the same thing with pride. An underinflated sense of pride (as a Christian) and it's not long before we wear out. An overinflated sense of pride (as a believer) and we will never have the traction (in our lives) we were meant to have.

I still remember my grandfather, driving in the Midwest, talking about the fields of wheat alongside the road; acre after acre as we drove. (You've probably seen it.) Some of the wheat was standing tall, straight-up. Some of it was bent low to the ground, almost touching. I remember asking him why that was.

Do you know what he said? He said, "It's like being a Christian." (That's what he said.) He said, "The wheat stalks standing tall have already lost their seeds. They're worth nothing. The wheat stalks bending low are the ones that are still filled and have a lot to give."

The apostle Paul said something similar, in our second lesson. In the church in Galatia, it was a concern about keeping all of God's laws. There was an arrogance that was starting to grow (among those) who thought they had it all down. What Paul was doing (in his letter) was to take them down, and to help them see where they actually stood.

Do you remember his bottom line? Do you remember where Paul found his reason to have any sense of Christian pride? After all he had done (as an apostle), after all he had given (as a servant of Christ), after all he had suffered for the sake of and in the name of Jesus. Do you remember what he said?

He said, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." May I never boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. May I never boast, except in what God has done for and accomplished in his Son for us.

Let me close with this. On this Sunday when three (four) of our students will be confirming their faith; on this Sunday, only a few days before the beginning of the season of Lent; on this Sunday when we find ourselves challenged with a story (and a reality) in which either of those two characters could be us. Let me close with this.

The extent to which you are able and willing to bow your head before God (and to recognize your need) is the same extent to which your life will ever be able to be (used by God) to help others in theirs. And the same extent to which you are willing to recognize and accept the value and worth you (and others) have been given in Christ is the same extent to which you will ever be of (value and worth) for him.

My friends, don't ever overinflate who you are apart from Jesus, and don't ever underinflate what he has called and enabled you to be. Amen.