

"PUFFED-UP PRIDE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
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New York, New York 10028  
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### INTRODUCTION

A Jewish comedian tells about two men of his faith who met out on the street. "Abe....why are you looking so sad?" asks Isaac. Abe answers, "It's my son....I sent him off to college and now he has come back home all full of Gentile ideas. Where did I go wrong?" Isaac then says to Abe, "Abe....funny you should mention it....my son, too, has come home from college...with his head all filled with Gentile ideas. There is but one course open to us. We must go see the Rabbi about this."

And so they make their way to the Synagogue and arrange to have time with their Rabbi. They say to the Rabbi, "Our two sons....whom we have raised to be devout followers of the Law have come home from college with their heads full of Gentile ideas. What can we do about it?" The Rabbi answers....

"Funny you should mention it! My son has also come back from college with all sorts of Gentile ideas. I assure you my friends...this problem is beyond solution. We must go into the place of worship and pray about it..."

And so the three of them go in and spread their hands in supplication to the Lord and no sooner have they articulated their common lament that their sons have become filled with Gentile ideas than the lights go out and the building is then filled with clouds of smoke and a thunderous voice answers them, "Funny.... that you should mention it...." Of course, to be theologically correct, God's Son never became a Gentile, remaining a devout Jew to the end.

### DEVELOPMENT

Much of the New Testament reflects the very natural strife in the early days of our faith between Judaism and its up-start and off-spring Christianity and that this strife should continue is really no credit to us. There is no greater shame that we bear than that our faith has been used as a pretext for persecuting Jewish people. Horrendous deeds have been done in the name of Christ. We know this. And many of our Jewish friends are quite naturally sensitive to such transgressions that blot the pages of history.

I think that one of the major stumbling blocks in Jewish-Christian relations is the New Testament characterization of the Pharisees. We should remember that the Pharisees are heroes to many Jews. They see them as reformers who saved the Jewish faith from corruption. To be sure, the Pharisees were human beings with faults, but there was much more that was positive about them than negative. And when the Pharisees are targeted on a regular basis from Christian pulpits in an unkind way, I'm sure it must be hurtful to many Jews.

Thus, I want to make sure you understand that when I speak of the Pharisees and the criticisms that Jesus made of them, those criticisms have nothing to do with their Jewishness. They are criticisms that could be made of religious leaders of every faith in every time. For example, when Jesus said, "They love to be called 'Rabbi'", we could just as easily say, "They love to be called 'Dr'" or "They love to be called 'Reverend'".

So, be careful what you call me...and remember this that people are people, and that pride is pride and yes - we all have pride. Even rabbis and priests and pastors and ministers.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale was one of the most sought after speakers of the 20th century. Shortly before his death, he spoke for his good friend, Robert Schuller of California's Crystal Cathedral. Dr. Schuller began his introduction by saying,

"I want to introduce you to the most dynamic person you will ever meet in your life. He is exciting, positive and winsome. He can reach down inside of you more deeply than anyone else you have ever known before. He will give you self confidence and courage, and a whole lot of other things you have always wanted in your life but have not had."

Well, Dr. Peale was astounded. He had never been introduced that way before. How could he possibly respond to this introduction. As he was trying to think of some response and as he was sitting straighter and taller than he had for years, he heard Dr. Schuller continue,

"The person of whom I am speaking, of course, is Jesus Christ. And here to tell you about him is my dear friend, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale".

I met him on several occasions and even attended his funeral service in December four or five years ago where we all stood and sang his favorite hymn, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know". And some of you may remember that line offered by Adlai Stevenson in that election many years ago, back in the nineteen fifties...

"Paul is appealing and Peale is appalling"..referring to St. Paul and Dr. Peale's choice of another candidate.

One is apt to find proud people in just about every profession and in every faith. I recently read about a Presbyterian pastor down in Tampa, Florida, who was using the word, "pastoring" in something he was writing. He was using Word Perfect on his computer and when he hit his computer's spell check key, it said the word "pastoring" was unknown. The checker, however, suggested the following alternatives:

- (A) pasturing...as in pasturing cattle.
- (B) pestering, and (C) posturing....."

After a good laugh, the pastor realized "how true it is"...for some pastors, like laymen, spend most of their hours either pasturing, pestering and posturing. And just go to an annual conference if you wish to see some pastors doing a bit of "posturing"....which reminds me of a conqueror who went to a Muslim holy man and said,

"Mulla...all the great rulers of the past had honorific titles with the name of God in them. There was, for instance, God-gifted and God-accepted and so on. How about some such name for me?" "God-forbid" said the Holy Man.

People are people. Pride is pride. At least we can laugh about it, but beware of the religious zealot who cannot laugh at himself..or herself. Beware of the man who claims to have a direct line and of whom it has been written:

GOD IS STILL GOD

Yes, God is still God. Dr. Carl Jung once said something that ought to cause every believer to carefully consider.

What he said was this:

"One of the main functions of formalized religion is to protect people against a direct experience of God".

*ECCLESIASTICAL*

That hurts, but yes - it can happen. Theological pride can be a bit of a buffer against a real experience of Christ's love and grace.

F. Kefa Sempangi, a Uganda pastor who barely escaped death under Idi Amin's persecution in the early nineteen seventies, captures this truth in a compelling and beautiful way in a book entitled, A Distant Grief. He writes about a hurtful change that came over him shortly after coming to this country and enrolling in a seminary, an evangelical seminary. He writes,

"In Uganda, my wife and I read the Bible for hope and for life. We read to hear of God's promises...to hear his commands and to obey them. There was no time for argument and no time for religious discrepancies and doubts.

Now in the security of a new life and with the reality of death fading from mind, I found myself reading Scripture to analyze texts and to speculate about meaning. I came to enjoy abstract theological discussion with my fellow students, and while these discussions were intellectually refreshing, it wasn't long before our fellowship revolved around ideas rather than the work of God in our lives. No longer was it the blood of Christ that gave us that feeling of unity, but our agreement on doctrinal issues. We came together not for confession and forgiveness, but for debate!"

This change in attitude towards God had its greatest impact on Kefa's prayer life, for he writes:

"God Himself had become a distant figure....He had become a subject of debate...an abstract category, and no longer did I pray to him as a living Father, but as an impersonal being who did not mind my inattention and unbelief."

And when he realized just how far he had drifted from God due to theological speculation, Kefa repented of his attitudes and immediately his prayer life came alive once again. He began once again to submit himself moment by moment to the spirit of the "living" God. People are people. Pride is pride. But fortunately, God is still God.

CLOSING STORY

I like this story shared by a colleague in a church down in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It seems that a faculty member of the State University was visiting this pastor's church. The pastor proceeded to pull out some of his best doctrinal sermons, presenting them in a superb fashion in the hope of winning this choice church prospect to his flock. After a month of such profound preaching aimed at such a learned person, the professor presented himself for church membership. The minister was delighted. "I did it" he thought to himself. "I did it...those great sermons...wonder which one did it." And so he asked the professor,

"Tell me...which of my sermons during that month brought you to a decision to join this church?" The professor, with a somewhat puzzled expression, replied...

"I don't know what you're talking about. A little old lady in the back row of the church made me feel so much at home by telling me how much she missed me when I wasn't there....that's why I made this church my home church!"

That's what it all comes down to, isn't it? It has very little to do with doctrine, even less to do with the intellect of the preacher and his preaching. It all has to do with the power of the living God working through individual Christians who love God and love their church. And maybe...maybe that's why Jesus ends this tough passage where he pokes at the puffed up pride of the Pharisees with these words...our take home text for today:

"But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

(Matthew 23: 11, 12)

Perhaps Jesus was simply trying to remind us that people are people. Pride is still pride. And God is still God. So, be careful to whom you listen and don't get carried away in the wrong direction. Keep your eye on Jesus and you'll come out OK.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence in these moments, O God...that come at the end of this time of prayer and praise. Wrestle with each of us in those hidden corners of our lives where pride lurks. Help us to listen to Your voice and to Your word as it comes to us in the story and the life of Your Son, Jesus. In His name, we pray. Amen.