

# *Pride: The Root of all Sin*

## Part Three: Self-Promotion:

### Taboo or Necessity?

*By John Austin, January 2024*

As I've said before, in our post-modern, capitalist world of a success-oriented culture, most are probably familiar with the expression, "you must sell yourself." In a grotesque caricature of this opportunistic motto, some cynical people might see this as prostituting oneself for business or employment. Oddly enough though, there might be a grain of truth to that. Please understand, I am not comparing job interviews and resumes to a hooker standing on a street corner hustling potential 'johns' to patronize their harlotry! What I am saying is that in a commodity-driven domain (much of the world), where everyone competes for jobs, or businesses compete for clients, people often must hustle and embellish the presentation of their abilities or skills to get hired or attract clients. It sounds crude but it is true.

A cursory look at job search statistics speaks volumes to this blunt reality. According to Jobsearch Canada Inc., a study revealed that out of the estimated 250 resumes an organization receives for a corporate opening, roughly six applicants get called for an interview, and only one gets the job. Mind you, this is in Canada, but I suspect the numbers are similar in several other developed countries.

James Ellis, considered one of the foremost authorities on employer branding, affirms that job applicants have an average of 5-6 seconds to get their resume accepted or tossed. He compares resumes to commercials and maintains that an applicant must assess which details to leave out of a resume and save for an interview to better impress their potential new employer. In short, Ellis punctuates resumes as “marketing documents,” to showcase what an amazing candidate you are.

Self-promotion isn't limited to employment or business either. Just look at all the dating sites online and you'll find a growing number of people looking for romance across the cyberscape. In 2022, more than 366 million people used online dating services worldwide with Internet dating generating 2.86 billion U.S. in revenue for the same year. According to Statista, a German online data gathering platform, it is estimated that by 2027, there could be up to 440 million online dating users worldwide. Currently, there are approximately 8,000 online dating sites competing for people seeking romance. The most popular are Tinder, Badoo, Plenty of Fish, and Bumble. There are also scores of niche market dating sites as well, such as Over 50, Extreme Age Gap, and Bald Dating, just to name a few. There are even Christian dating sites, such as e-Harmony, Elite, Match, and Christian Mingle.

Another facet to online dating is that it's not only used for romance. In a February 2020 article in The Economic Times, Tinder is being used for marketing and political campaigning –another conduit for self-promotion. A cursory look on any search engine will reveal dozens of sites educating people on how to better present oneself to potential lovers, with the tactic of embellishing one's best qualities or traits in the hopes of attracting Mister or Miss Right. I am not saying that online dating is necessarily wrong for Christians; there are differing views on that within Christendom and there is

nothing in scripture that explicitly forbids this approach to finding a soulmate. What I am saying, is that—like any venture in life—we, as followers of Christ must follow the moral/ethical principles found in the word of God so as not to cross that subtle line into an ironic foolhardy pursuit that so many of us can easily traverse with the intention of pursuing something valid.

If any of us are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we've all promoted ourselves—depending on the reason—to get a job or attract clients, to varying degrees, and for those of us looking for love, a date. It's as much a part of our modus operandi as professionalism or personal hygiene. Yet, it does underscore a harsh truth about human beings: no matter how much we profess to care about each other, we're often drawn into an orbit of rivalry that can sometimes appear like Social Darwinism, in a survival-of-the-fittest dynamic. It's just the way our world is.

For those of us who profess to follow Christ, we must decipher between healthy and malicious competition. This rings true for any venture, and, as it is with all forms of pride, if we're successful, we'll negotiate that precipice between hubris and false humility –without falling.

With that in mind, is it necessarily a sin when we promote ourselves to achieve our goals in life, be it jobs and careers, business, or dating?

Well, according to Stefanie Sword-Williams, author of *F\*ck Being Humble: Why Self Promotion Isn't a Dirty Word* (2020), people tend to get hung up on self-promotion coming across as arrogant. Sword-Williams asserts that the aim of this book is to help those who seek to overcome shyness and gain self-confidence. Through this book—and her online mentoring platform by the same name—she believes that she has helped thousands of people present themselves and their abilities rather than waiting until they are 'experts' in their relative fields to promote themselves. This reasoning seems to align with those of the Aristotelian mindset on pride. The key distinction in this is Sword-Williams' assertion that self-promotion must be applied in increments and that self-promotion—and self-confidence—doesn't necessarily have to reflect competence, at least not in a fully developed sense.

She believes that this incremental self-promotion of small achievements can

be a display of ongoing development to be noticed before a promotion or hiring. Sort of a precursor to ‘milestones of success.’ She professes to believe in humility but not at a cost to personal success, which she sees as a problem in her country (the U.K.) because of a culture that she thinks vilifies self-promotion. Interestingly, she sees the U.S., on the contrary, as a country with a culture that celebrates self-promotion.

As with other forms of humanism, this view contrasts sharply with the biblical worldview of self-promotion. As we see in Proverbs, Solomon points to diligence—not self-promotion—as the ethically sound way to gain recognition. “The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor.” (Prov. 12:24). “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.” (Prov. 22:29). Conversely, on self-promotion, Solomon wrote: “Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence, or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.” (Prov. 25:6-7) To stress a point about the futility of human pride, Jesus quoted this proverb as recorded in Luke 14:8-11 to illustrate the foolhardiness of premature self-promotion and he also reflected the divine view of self-promotion in his Sermon on the Mount, where he tells us, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.” (Mat.6:1, NASB)

As with all forms of pride, this of course begs the question: Can we still ethically promote our personal brand when competing for careers, business, or dates without committing the sin of pride?

In a July 2023 article in Themelios, the online journal of The Gospel Coalition, an evangelical, multi-denominational ‘watchdog’ alliance, author and leadership coach Miranda Carls attempted to address the issue of reconciling the apparent opposition between humility and self-promotion. In the article, *How Can I Lead a Quiet Life When My Job Requires Self Promotion?* Carls implies that the pursuit of self-promotion seems to contradict Thessalonians 4:11-12, which tells us to lead quiet lives. Carls cites the proliferation of social media in post-modern culture and with that, people exhibiting everything in their lives from pay increases to family outings. The advent of reality TV shows, talent shows, and the Internet in the

early twenty-first century almost seems like a fulfillment of a secular proverb mistakenly attributed to pop artist Andy Warhol, in which he supposedly said that everyone wanted to be famous, to which photographer Nat Finkelstein replied, “Yeah, for about fifteen minutes,” at a photo-op for one of Warhol’s art shows in 1968.

When you look at YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, WeChat, and many other sites, it’s not surprising that more and more people are vying for their acclaimed fifteen minutes of celebrity. The evidence of this desire for notoriety reveals itself in the endless tables of ‘views’, ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ that traverse the Internet’s online egoscape. Yet, Carls says that for people who are not open to exhibiting their lives online, it is still possible to do so with minimal social pressure. I would agree with that view in that I know of a few people who don’t see social media as a necessity in their lives, but rather, as a bonus tool that can benefit them in a variety of ways.

While it may still be possible for some people to get along in life without social media and the self-promotion that it entails, more and more people are drawn into its sheer magnetism, often for convenience and practicality. This phenomenon is much like it was with rotary dial telephones, then radio, then TV, then personal computers, then cell phones, and finally, smart phones. Moreover, Carls says that there are many occupations that require people to build a “positive personal brand” such as real estate (and for that matter, other sales careers), communications, or public office. She points to real estate brokers and the role they play in selling houses and says that the way to not violate God’s morality on self-promotion is to “pivot” from promoting oneself to promoting the value that a broker would give to a potential client. In doing that, Carls stresses that the broker is no longer drawing attention to himself or herself, but rather, to look out for the interests of others (Phil.2-4). This strategy of selling something is following the humility and “other centeredness” of Christ. She admits that recognition of the broker may be an inevitable by-product, but it should never be the goal. She points to extraordinarily famous people such as the Apostle Paul, Charles Spurgeon, R.C. Sproul, and Billy Graham who served God with distinction but tempered that notoriety with humility by using their loud platforms to showcase the gospel rather than themselves. Celebrity or not, these men of God were doing something all of us who profess to follow Christ are

instructed to do: to fulfill the Great Commission. In the spirit of our lives being the principal conduit of fulfilling that commission, Carls stresses integrity, humility and honesty as hallmarks of Christ-like behavior we should exhibit instead of exhibiting self-promotion.

She focuses on connecting rather than promoting by showing genuine interest in others, as opposed to talking about ourselves and about our past achievements. In doing so, we would be better able to develop the wisdom the Lord would give us, rather than risk needless disgrace (Prov.11:2). Moreover, when we refrain from self-promotion and—when the circumstances call for it—boast of the Lord’s role in our success, we shift the focus from us to the real source of all that contributed to our success in the first place (Jer.9:23,24). The characteristic of a Christ-like approach, as opposed to “self-promotion” is that we would ask others about themselves rather than talk about ourselves. The wonderful irony of this approach is that a person (especially in sales) would perform much better and as a result, draw more attention to their performance without promoting their performance. When examining the context of Paul’s letters to the Christians in Thessalonica, we can see the emphasis on pursuing not a completely obscure existence but more accurately, a lifestyle of modesty, sound stewardship and a good work ethic, as distinguished from lifestyles that are rife with cavalier grandstanding and gossiping (1 Thess.4:6-12, 2 Thess.3:6-12).

Another form of self-promotion is a less conspicuous, but equally pretentious one known as ‘humblebragging.’ The term was first coined in the early 2000s by comedic writer, Harris Wittels, who wrote for several TV shows, most notably NBC’s Parks and Recreation. Since then, it has been woven into the vernacular of a growing number of people in the English-speaking world, particularly the online world.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines humblebragging as the act of making, “a seemingly modest, self-critical, or casual statement or reference that is meant to draw attention to one’s admirable or impressive qualities or achievements.” The Urban Dictionary defines it as speaking, “in a covert yet boastful manner,” and, “to show off with indirect phrasing.” Psychology Today defines it more acutely as “showcasing achievements under the guise of self-deprecation or false modesty” so a person can, “subtly highlight their

accomplishments while maintaining a facade of humility.”

In a July 3, 2023, blog from the online magazine for The Balancing Act, a morning TV show about women’s lifestyles, humblebragging was viewed through the Aristotelian lens as an effective tool for personal branding and social validation. In their view, it is cast as an art textured by manipulative nuances and social tactics designed to “strike a balance between downplaying achievements and subtly showcasing them to maintain authenticity and engage with others effectively.”

Those who humblebrag probably know that overt bragging (self-exaltation) is pompous and frowned on by a lot of people. Therefore, to flex their egos, humblebraggers try to sound humble while boasting. I’m reminded of people who have said, “I can’t believe I got ninety-eight percent on that exam! The teacher must’ve really dumbbed that one down!”

The realm of Christian psychology however, casts it in a less flattering way.

Brandi Gann, a mental health counsellor and bible teacher based in Tennessee, said in a February 2016 blog titled, “Humblebragging” is Still Bragging and God Knows It! that the prevalence of humblebragging in social media circles is commonly manifested in posts whereby a person will talk about others bragging on them. A classic example of this would be someone saying, “Bill said I’m the best (or most talented, skilled, intelligent) person in this world that he has ever met, and that he admires me.” To echo Gann’s observations on a similar humblebrag she saw on a post, it’s good that Bill complimented that person, and that the one being complimented acknowledges that, but it’s always more appropriate to let Bill tell others about the compliment rather than by the person being complimented. This is a clear indication to others that the person talking about the compliment is trying to brag while being ostensibly humble. Gann says that most people are not tricked by this tactic, and I would agree. I can personally attest to encountering more than a few people over the course of my life, who are guilty of this behavior.

Even the secular world seems to see through the futile ruse of the humblebrag, despite the ego-oriented, pop-culture ethos of self-promotion orthodoxy.

In a January 2018 article, *Humblebragging Makes People Dislike You*, by Jamie Ducharme of Time, Ovul Sezer, assistant professor of organizational behavior at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill's (UNC) Kenan-Flagler Business School, humblebragging is a "common phenomenon", and she described this behavior as "annoying." She asserted that all of us know people who humblebrag. Sezer conducted a study on humblebragging with researchers at Harvard and UNC, and the findings were published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, a peer-reviewed scientific journal of the American Psychological Association. In this experiment, Sezer and her team found that humblebragging is ubiquitous, infiltrating every avenue of life, from the workplace or school to social circles. Researchers found that out of 646 people surveyed, 70 percent recalled hearing a recent humblebrag. They also found that there are two types of humblebrags: those who infuse complaints into their humblebragging and those who utilize humility. They discovered that 60 percent of humblebrags used complaints.

Sezer and her team then tested the response of people to both humblebraggers and overt braggers with an emphasis on the bragger's perceived likability and competence. On both counts, they found that overt bragging was seen as better than humblebragging because it was perceived as more genuine. Even complainers were seen as less annoying. Sezer affirms it would better to brag outrightly and own one's self-promotion, reaping the rewards of their sincerity rather than "losing in all dimensions" from humblebragging. She opines further that it's even better to, "get someone else to 'wingman' your boasting." In the case of this study—and Sezer's view—science seems to confirm what the Bible says in Proverbs 27:2: "Let another praise you and not your own mouth; A stranger and not your own lips."

Another sad truth to this form of bragging is how easily—and often—any of us could cross that proverbial line and commit this sin. In view of how common humblebragging is for most of humanity, let's look at the two major views about the reason so many of us humblebrag. Modern psychologists say we humblebrag because of shame. In a July 11, 2018 *Psychology Today* article by Mariana Plata titled, *The Psychology of Humblebragging*, Brene Brown, a pioneer researcher of shame and resilience, explained that shame is a sensation arising from negative experiences, or things we've done or failed to do that we believe makes us unworthy of connection. She further said that



“we disguise our bragging with fake humility because we’ve been taught to hide our successes.”

This assessment echos what Stefanie Sword-Williams believes about the vilification of self-promotion.

However, Plata also believes the reason we dislike hearing others humblebrag is because, for many of us, it provokes sensitivities about personal struggles we may have, such as an infertile woman hearing another woman disguise the blessing of fertility as a curse. Plata rightly points out that it comes off as insincere and insensitive. I have personally witnessed men who humblebrag about being married with children in the presence of childless bachelors who have missed out on that blessing for reasons beyond their control. I have also heard about wealthy people in the presence of poorer people humblebrag about how hard it is to have so much money. Of course, there is also a fine line of those being bothered by the humblebrag of falling into what Plata calls the “comparison trap,” which—from the Christian worldview—can lead to the sin of envy, the inverse effect of pride.

The biblical view of the reason for humblebragging is to fool other people—and possibly us—into believing that maybe we still are humble when in fact we’re just bragging. Based on my own observations, it seems that we cloak our bragging beneath a veneer of false humility because, deep down, we know that we’re sinning. Yet, if we can temper that bragging with a veil of modesty or unworthiness, maybe we could express a makeshift disclaimer to others—and God, if we believe in Him—for daring to brag in the first place. It really amounts to nothing more than a weak attempt at an apology. If any of us are honest about ourselves, we’ll admit that it is a type of moral insurance we employ to clear our consciences about our own pride.

Harkening back to the secular view of shame, the biblical view makes perfect sense when we realize the shame we often feel about bragging stems from that nagging conscience –God's moral barometer.

Humblebragging often happens when a person feels doubtful or self-conscious about their performance in a job or at school, or with their social status, and seeks positive affirmation from an authority figure or someone they respect. There is a universal truth to human beings about the need to feel validated. In varying degrees, depending on how secure or insecure one

feels about themselves, it has been my experience that people yearn for others to believe that their lives matter. The more secure a person is about themselves, the less likely they'll need validation from others, and the less likely they'll brag or humblebrag. The less secure they are, the more likely they'll seek others' affirmation, and the more likely they'll brag or humblebrag. That doesn't necessarily mean that all insecure people will brag, but the proclivity could still be there under the right circumstances. There are two aspects of humblebraggers that are likely true though. For the humblebragger who couches their bragging into self-directed complaint or humility, it seems like they're saying what they want to believe about themselves while counteracting it with a denial, just to be sure they might not sound too boastful. Whereas the humblebragger who attests the brag to another person seems as though they are reliving others' affirmation by proxy. What is common about both forms is that people who brag try to reassure themselves that their life indeed has value. As with the security issue, all of us, to varying degrees, are guilty of this sin. The real tragedy is that many of us can never be satisfied because that shadow of uncertainty always looms.

Hence the need to continually humblebrag.

In conclusion, self-promotion can only be dealt with effectively by the person in question seeing himself or herself through God's Agape lens of how He sees them. It is the only way to focus clearly to see that precipice between hubris and false humility so we can successfully maneuver ourselves through a wasteland of bruised egos. Agape is the Greek word for 'charity' or 'divine love' which is the highest form of love in existence, in which the one giving the love intentionally seeks another's highest good. It is not drawn out of attraction, like Eros, or obligation, like Storge or Xenos. It is 'other-centered' and sacrificial, best exemplified in Christ Jesus, who gave his life to free humanity from the rightful wrath of God and to free humanity from the egotistical trappings of selfism. In reference to insecure people seeking affirmation through self-promotion, whether through overt bragging or its somewhat covert cousin, 'humblebragging,' that insecurity can be eternally arrested by that Agape love when we genuinely seek the selfless lover of our souls, Christ. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect

in love.” (1 John 4:18)

For those who have come to the end of themselves and sought Christ and belong to him—and therefore, the Heavenly Father—through the drawing of the Holy Spirit, we don’t need to promote ourselves to impress anyone; we’re already accepted by the creator of all life in the universe and are highly valued by God not because of us but because of who He is and the profound certitude that He created us, has always known us intimately, understands all of our thoughts, and has ordained our entire lives before we ever came into existence (Psalm 139:1-18). As Christ says in Matthew 10:29-31: “Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

In a cursed world where sin has warped our perspectives, and therefore our strategies for acceptance and success, where we often feel the need to impress someone, I’m reminded of a message on a marquee in front of a church I saw years ago while walking to work one morning: “God created you for the pleasure of your company.”

There’s no need to impress that boss.

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