

# *Pride: The Root of all Sin*

## Part Two: Self-Exaltation:

### Giving Credit to Oneself

*By John Austin, August 2023*

Pride can manifest itself in many ways. It can also camouflage itself deep within the stratum of legitimate human perspectives, emotions, and grievances. Six forms of these manifestations have been categorized by theologians and biblical commentators.

Author and commentator Pedro Cheung divides these six forms of pride between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ forms. The ‘positive’ forms identified by Cheung are self-exaltation, self-promotion, and self-justification, while the ‘negative’ forms he distinguishes are self-degradation, self-demotion, and self-condemnation. The key factor

to all forms of pride though, is that all can be very deceptive. Spread throughout the six major forms of pride, are fifty “fruits” or behavioral qualities of pride identified by speaker, author and church consultant, Brent Detwiler. For the sake of brevity, I will not burden you with all fifty!

I will continue in this series by looking at self-exaltation. There are a few qualities that seem to stand out for those who exhibit this form of pride. The fruits of pride that arise from self-exaltation include: the desire to draw attention to oneself (Proverbs 27:2), the desire to talk about oneself and talk over other people, being deceitful and pretentious to make oneself appear better than he or she actually is [particularly about their sin] (Psalm 24:3-4, 26:2-4; Jer.48:10; Prov.26:20-26), the desire to make a name for oneself and be more important than others (Isaiah 14:13-15; James 3:13-16; Romans 12:6), the desire to be overly competitive to the point where the individual is bothered when they’re not on top, and the desire to impress people and grandstand their accomplishments (Luke 10:38-42).

The characteristic with these authors is that they point to the authority of biblical scripture and not merely their own observations. What is most compelling about the qualities identified is that secular and scientific observations seem to corroborate and confirm what the Bible—and hence, God—has been telling us for several millennia.

Self-exaltation is the most obvious form of pride in people and can only be noticed when openly expressed, especially in the social arena of competition. Although it is the most glaring manifestation of pride, it too can be tricky for any of us to notice, if we are not careful to observe our carnal nature’s susceptibility to its lure. It is often easy for any of us to criticize beaming athletes like

Muhammed Ali, who shouted, “I am the greatest!” when he was a brash, young boxer or when we hear brilliant scientists boast of their intelligence while ignoring the combined efforts of their colleagues. Charismatic politicians that attribute their countries’ success to their own initiatives, or entrepreneurs boasting of their business acumen for their company’s fortune are also prominent targets to castigate. In the world of medicine, Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and chief medical advisor to the president of the United States, is quoted as saying, “A lot of what you’re seeing as attacks on me, quite frankly, are attacks on science.” While I am not a doctor or scientist, I can point to other doctors and scientists, such as Doctor Paul Alexander, who made an objective comparison between Fauci and other doctors and found that Doctor Peter McCullough, Doctor Harvey Risch, and Doctor Robert Malone—highly qualified practitioners—who disagreed with Fauci on his COVID policies, got a far higher rating on their expertise and experience treating patients than Fauci and yet did not speak about themselves in such a self-absorbed manner.

Former U.S. president and real estate magnate Donald Trump also comes to mind when observing self-exaltation.

Psychology professor Jessica Tracy of the University of British Columbia, in her 2016 book, *Take Pride: Why the Deadliest Sin Holds the Secret to Human Success*, points to Trump as a classic example of this form of pride, citing his defensiveness in the face of criticism.

“Every time he’s challenged, his immediate response is to attack outwards,” says Tracy.

She adds that the kind of pride found in people like Trump [in its

self-exalting form] can be immensely helpful in attaining power in our society. Tracy points to hubristic, or self-exalting pride in playing a significant role in both his business and political success. She affirms that much of his success can be traced (even in his pre-political days) to tactics of intimidation against competitors and detractors, by name-calling, insulting, and implicit or explicit threats of violence. Such strategies have ensured that those who oppose him either defer or retreat. “I play to win,” Trump has often said. Tracy views Americans who voted for Trump, as people who saw him as someone who could use his aggressive, intimidating ploys to get back something they believed was theirs. In a nation as politically polarized as the U.S., with a Left Wing as equally contentious as their Right Wing, someone like Trump, with his bellicose demeanor, fits quite well in a western culture that gave rise to self-exaltation through the mesmerizing power of television celebrity and advertising.

Just to be clear, I’m not anti or pro-Trump and this isn’t a political treatise; it’s just an observation of self-exaltation in the often-nasty arena of politics.

Like many secular psychologists and philosophers, Tracy sees pride as an emotion that humans developed through evolution, solely for the purpose of “feeling good about ourselves.” She views pride as the reason for our ascent to civilization with technology and the arts, placing us above the Animal Kingdom. She credits pride for our desire to be morally upright. While she correctly sees hubris or arrogance towards less talented or less capable people as wrong, she—like so many of her ilk—ignores God’s role in giving us morality and ethics. The sad irony to this well-intentioned postulation is that she thinks we can devise morality on our own because of evolution, denying the premise that God is. Tracy

believes the key to not succumbing to self-exaltation (hubris), but to use pride to achieve success is to accept pride as a part of who we are and to channel that pride for altruistic purposes.

Again, that runs contrary to the Christian worldview which declares, “Not that we are adequate in ourselves so as to consider anything as having come from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.” (2 Cor.3:5).

While many of us can denounce Ali or Trump for egotism, the inclination for any of us to get defensive or strike back when criticized, or to credit our success to our own abilities or efforts is palpable, given the right circumstances. Our carnal nature is always lurking beneath a veneer of civility, hungry to satiate a sin-sickened ego.

But is it necessarily always the sin of pride when we boast about ourselves, a favorite sports team, or a political candidate? Moreover, is pride—particularly the self-exalting variety—something that people are necessarily taught?

According to a study Tracy did with a former colleague of hers, Rick Robbins of the University of California in Davis, there appears to be a universal pride expression, “that can be recognized from the streets of Davis, California to the savannahs of Burkina Faso, Africa.” This expression—that has been identified by other psychologists as well—includes a slight smile, head tilted back, chest puffed out, and the hands rested on the hips, or raised in the air. What is even more telling of this posture is that it has even been seen in the congenitally blind—a clear indication that the capacity for this gesture is innate amongst all of humanity since there is no visual, cultural reference for it.

That looks a lot like the original sin nature we read about in the Bible that we are all born with!

And yet, many in society often tolerate expressions of pride, even if their religious beliefs contradict that tolerance.

In the article, *The Power of Pride: Vice or Virtue*, Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus of the University of Idaho points to the apparent moral contradiction of people who affirm the sinfulness of pride when they show up for church Sunday morning, and yet, cheer for their favorite sports team [and ridicule the opposing team] the previous Friday or Saturday when their team wins. In view of that discordant mindset of those that are ‘humble’ churchgoers one day, and raucous, boastful sports fans another day, I can see why some non-Christians might view that behavior as hypocritical. One can only wonder if those same people would be as exultant about their favorite team if it loses.

This is not to necessarily say that it is wrong to cheer for one’s favorite sports team. It is not. Sports are a wonderful aspect of culture across all of humanity and hold the potential for bringing people together in a healthy camaraderie through competition, that doesn’t involve killing, unlike war for example. Sports are also a fantastic way to build character and teach social skills to children. Conversely though, sports hold the same potential for ego and pride to run amok—even among fans—which is why good sportsmanship really is essential to athletics. Sports, with a culture of competition, and therefore, a test of the ego, are a perfect crucible to scrutinize pride and humility.

The most obvious example is demonstrated with Christian athletes

that testify to their faith in Jesus when they win and merit fame and fortune. To many that profess Christ, it seems good for Christian athletes to attribute a Superbowl or Stanley Cup victory to their faith in Christ and there would be a tangible grain of truth to that.

But is it necessarily the best way to leave a powerful impression on unbelievers?

In a July 2021 article in Christianity Today, Clayton Trutor points to Olympic athletes like British sprinter Eric Liddell, the famous runner of the 1924 Olympics in Paris, who was featured in the 1981 film, Chariots of Fire. What is most striking about Liddell, who later became a missionary to China, is that he passed up an opportunity for athletic glory in the 100-metre sprint because it was held on a Sunday, but he chose to honor Christ instead of competing. Tutor also cites speed skater Dan Janson, who suffered multiple setbacks due to illness and tragedy. Despite losing two events after hearing of his sister's death from leukemia during the 1988 Winter games, he persevered to finally win in 1994. Through all the losses, he still maintained his faith in Christ.

Tutor also mentions more recent athletes who have won multiple gold medals, like American sprinter Allyson Felix, who has opened sports clinics for children around the world, and Jamaica's Shelly-Anne Fraser-Pryce, who has used sports as a ministry to spread the gospel. George Foreman, two-time heavyweight boxing champion and one of Ali's biggest opponents, once said in an interview that if he found fame and fortune [from boxing], his mother—a fervent Christian who prayed for Foreman's salvation—would not need God, and neither would he. That view changed for Foreman after he became a follower of Christ in 1977 and chose to leave boxing to become a minister of the gospel. His return to the ring in 1994 after

a long hiatus, becoming the oldest boxer in history to win back his title might seem like a desire for athletic celebrity to some. Although his financial manager lost Foreman's fortune, and the prizefighter was forced to return to boxing to continue financing a youth center he had developed, Foreman says the other reason for returning to the sport was the hope of sharing Christ from the platform of professional sport because of the potential for reaching such a large audience of fans. Foreman, who lost the title to Ali in 1974 in Kinshasa, Congo, achieved 76 wins (twenty more than the great Ali) and 68 knockouts (compared to Ali's 37). Over a thirty-year career, Foreman never boasted of being the greatest, but has no problem boasting about his Lord and Saviour.

What a marked distinction from Ali.

In contrast to Christian and non-Christian athletes that only speak of their victories in competition when discussing faith, these Christian athletes can be commended for using sports as a platform for ministry, perseverance in the face of defeat, and the desire to honor Christ above winning. In view of these examples, I am reminded of a radio program in the late 1980s on Christianity in sport, when an atheist—whose name I can't recall—said he was far more impressed by the faith of a Christian NFL footballer joyfully pointing to Christ in the face of defeat than footballers that praise their Lord after scoring touchdowns.

Yet, how does that compare with what the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians where he uses an athletic analogy to illustrate his desire to, "win the prize" of enduring his Christian walk to the end of his temporal, physical life? [emphasis mine] (1 Cor. 9:24-27). It fits perfectly when one considers that since the word 'prize' is really a metaphor for staying the course of his commitment

to Christ, it leaves no room for the literal competition one would see in actual sporting events. In this analogy, Paul is not competing with anyone except his own sinful nature. The ‘boxer’ training he speaks of is a metaphor for not acquiescing to his carnal nature so that it would be less of a hindrance to his walk of faith that he puts in Christ to keep him from being “disqualified” from that ‘prize’ in the first place.

When viewing what people say after they have achieved something notable, whether in sports or any other pursuit, is it still a sin to boast of one’s achievements when that person is aware of their abilities?

Well, Muhammed Ali—that ever-boastful pugilist—would not see it that way, and reaffirmed his vaunt from the 1960s many years later when he qualified his infamous remark by saying, “It ain’t bragging if you can do it.” Whether he realized it or not, Ali echoed the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who believed that humility was a vice because the accomplished person is not being true to himself or herself. Aristotle posited that ‘genuine pride’ is a “mean” between the excess of boasting when nothing has been attained, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the deficit of failing to acknowledge what one has achieved. Professor Gier suggests that the key to walking that fine line between hubris (unjustified pride) and “false humility” (self-degradation), is to learn how to talk about our accomplishments without bragging about them. Yet, he also admits that “it is not an easy line to draw.”

In view of Aristotle’s—and Gier’s—assessment, has someone like Ali traversed that proverbial line successfully?

Well, if one looks at Tori McClure, the first woman to row across the Atlantic back in 1999, it might seem that way, if not in reference to

Ali, then at least to McClure. In an interview with Diane Rehm of National Public Radio, McClure—who volunteered at the Muhammed Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky—said that she was inspired by Ali to re-attempt rowing after a failed attempt. Ali told her that she should not live with the failure of her first attempt, and she admitted he was right and thereafter achieved her goal. What is remarkable about McClure’s telling of her harrowing feat is that she did not brag about it but recounted her tour de force as though it were a grueling hike. I sometimes wonder if McClure is a follower of Christ!

With that in mind, what does the word of God have to say about Aristotle’s assertion that we should be ‘true to ourselves?’

In the Old Testament, we are told that “The [human] heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 NASB) When one considers that the world’s wisdom is foolishness to God (1 Corinthians 3:19 NASB), Aristotle’s certainty about being true to something deceitful and desperately sick flies in the face of the One who created all life, including the impressive intelligence of a great philosopher such as Aristotle.

Yet, in our self-aggrandizing culture that is teeming with self-help books and electronic media, people with voracious egos hungry for vainglory devour the modern-day doctrines of self-exaltation from Aristotelian thinkers such as Richard Taylor, who, in his book, *Restoring Pride: The Lost Virtue of our Age* (1996), defines pride as “justifiable love.” According to Taylor’s philosophy, pride is “the appreciation of one’s own special worth and superiority over others, and to be correct in so believing.”

Taylor believes that people who use their gifts or talents for lasting and significant achievements have a right to be proud of themselves while those who default to an easier, more pleasant, common way of life, doing only what is expected of them, are in his view, “wasting their lives.” He charges that everyone has a gift and that they should figure out what that gift is and pursue it.

While it is important for people to make the most of the talents God has blessed them with, to not be lazy, and not seek the path of least resistance for the sake of personal comfort, (Prov.13:4), it is also important to view one’s talents—and therefore, ambitions—considering God’s role in those talents and the opportunities to use them. The key issue in the Christian worldview regarding the use of talent is whether God is being glorified or not. Everything we do should be to the glory of Christ, not ourselves (Colossians 3:17).

The famous Russian American writer and philosopher Ayn Rand (1905-1982)—like many modern psychologists—saw pride as a virtue, describing it as “moral ambitiousness” because, in her view, it was predicated on the aspiration to live up to one’s ideals. To Rand, and many of her devotees, pride is the “moral principle of valuing one’s self-esteem and taking the steps to achieve it.” She further explained that pride is the recognition of the fact that you are your own highest value, and like all man’s values, it must be earned. Pride turns out to be self-respect plus the desire for self-improvement, by Rand’s estimation, and is echoed in many motivational speakers today. This harkens back to Ali’s reaffirmation of his “I am the greatest” boast, in that Ali further asserted that everyone could succeed just as he did. If one sees Ali as a braggart, then his type of bragging would seem more in line with Rand’s belief that pride does not require any recognition of superiority over others (unlike Taylor’s appraisal of pride and the

self) and that everyone should have something to be proud of.

To Christians, Rand would seem like someone who sees individuals as possessing their own valid morality and ethics and thereby would not need God. Rand elaborated on this philosophy in her 1964 Collection of Essays, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*. Interestingly, followers of Rand's philosophy, which is rooted in her Objectivist philosophy of the individual living one's life for their own benefit and not necessarily for the benefit of others, oddly find Taylor's philosophy elitist and egocentric. Yet, both philosophies are rooted in the same ethos: humanism. This view of self and pride runs contrary to the ethos of Christ and the gospel, and the selflessness that arises from that.

The eastern religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism seem to agree with the Judeo-Christian view of pride. However, a closer look at those beliefs reveals something quite different. This can be seen in their view of the Dharma, which is believed to be a means of righteousness through duty and selflessness. To Buddhists it is finding a path to enlightenment by living in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha and the culmination of the Four Noble Truths, which is to find the path that frees one from suffering. To Hindus, it is living according to one's destined purpose, or their karma. From the eastern perspective, when a man is proud, he violates the Dharma and goes to hell at once (The Dharmasutra of Apastamba 1.13.4).

So much for a chance at repentance and forgiveness!

While much of the morals and ethics of these eastern religions are a good guide for relative moralistic living, what is missing in these beliefs is the truth that without the Creator of humanity—Almighty

God—no path to enlightenment or fulfillment of karma can save us from eternal damnation. In short, the eastern view of self and pride is limited in that the only way one can overcome pride is by a person doing something. This view of morality bears close resemblance to Judaism and Islam, which also teach a works-based salvation of one's eternal soul.

Contrast that to Christianity, which is a reliance on God, who already did something for humanity in the person of Christ, whose righteousness alone can make us morally acceptable to God.

As for the recovering addict seeking personal validation, trying to make sense of how badly they messed up their lives, any form of self-exaltation—be it through humanistic philosophy or eastern and near-eastern religions—can sometimes be very tempting, especially when they hear terms like “self-worth.”

I recall hearing of the addiction recovery philosophy of self-worth when I was enrolled at a treatment center in Windsor, Ontario thirty years ago. The philosophy of the center identified self-pity as the root of what they deemed “the disease” of addiction (in their words, the umbrella term of alcoholism) that, at a pivotal moment in the life of the addict, caused them to “close up” to anything positive or healthy in their self-view and view of others and thus stunt the emotional and spiritual maturing of that individual, thereby causing them to live a lifestyle that degrades their self-worth and darkens their outlook on life. Conversely, the remedy for this self-abasement of the addict is for him or her to live a lifestyle of doing positive things so that they can re-build their self-worth that they formerly sought to destroy through a compulsive, substance-abusing lifestyle.

While it is true that human beings do tend to live lifestyles reflecting

their view of themselves and others, and that a healthier lifestyle will yield a better outlook on life, the notion that one can increase their self-worth through better behavior is identical to the eastern religions and in stark contrast to the gospel of Christ and the value that God places on humanity. We are made in the image of God (Gen.1:27), those who belong to God will never be forgotten even if other people abandon them (Isaiah 49:15), and most importantly, God bestowed the highest value on humanity by sending His Son, Christ Jesus to die in our place simply because He loves us even in our sin and depravity (Romans 5:8). Our worth is not based on our behavior. Duty and selflessness are not prerequisites for righteousness, but rather are the result of the righteousness conferred to those who come to Christ admitting that they are utterly helpless and incapable of righteousness outside of God's grace.

As for having something to be proud of, alluding to Ayn Rand's philosophy, and humanist beliefs, that view crumbles before the triune God of the Universe: "For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think but to think so as to have sound judgement as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." (Romans 12:3, NASB).

To 'walk that fine line' of talking about one's achievements without bragging can only be accomplished by alluding to God's grace, not our abilities or even our determination in the face of incredible odds. Moreover, it cannot be achieved by accepting pride as a necessary part of us, because, as the Word of God says, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. (Rom.7:18 NASB).

As we are reminded in scripture, Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his

might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts, boast of this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness in the earth. For I delight in these things, declares the Lord.” (Jer.9:23-24 NASB).

In examining self-exaltation then, is it okay to want to win? Is it okay to want to be on top?

Vince Lombardi, head coach of the Green Bay Packers in the 1960s, and the most successful coach in NFL history, leading his team to five championships and two of the first Superbowls, was misquoted as saying, “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” He later clarified his quote, “The will to win is the only thing.” Among other notable statements he said, “We run to win, not just be in the race.”

Was winning or being the best the only thing that mattered to him?

Lombardi was touted as being a driven perfectionist, allegedly obsessed with winning. Yet he was a realist who believed in pursuing perfection—not to be perfect—but to achieve excellence. Interestingly, Lombardi was never that impressed with talent so much as he was effort. “It is not natural talent that determines winners and losers,” he said. Lombardi has pointed to many talented people who have been abject failures and those with average talent that have achieved astounding success internationally.

When we—as followers of Christ—observe the secular appraisal of pride, we must consider the key difference between the secular (the world) and the sacred (God). The secular is largely humanist, and therefore deifies the self as God with the belief that we human beings are our own highest value. The sacred on the other hand,

shows humanity the true God who didn't value himself over others but rather, valued others before himself and in utter humility, cloaked himself in the vulnerability of human flesh to pay the penalty that we—not him—deserved to pay for valuing ourselves above all else.

What does that mean to the Christian? It means to give our best effort—not to inflate our ego—but as an act of worship to God. As the Word of God admonishes us, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men.” (Col.3:23, NASB).

That, I believe, is what all of us—who profess faith in Christ—should do, not for our own glory, but to the glory of God, who enables us to achieve excellence, because without Him who created us and died for us, we would not even exist, let alone achieve anything.

This is why the gospel is the greatest paradox of love in human history, that Christ, the only one who holds the right of pride would instead humble himself, on our behalf, and become the very thing—sin—that resulted from the pride that separated us from God in the first place, so that we could have the opportunity to be reconciled back to God.

Christ—who is part of the triune God, Yahweh—is the light of redemption for souls ravaged by that original sin of pride, and the only means to eternal life for humanity, and it is a light none of us can create but desperately need.

“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (Mat. 5:16, NASB).

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