The Sin Of Spiritual Pride

By William Gurnall

One type of spiritual pride that grows like tares among wheat and which Satan uses to assault the Christian, is *pride of grace*. Gifts equip us to *do*; grace equips us to *be*. We are talking here about the measure of grace or godly attributes which God gives a person. We know everything we possess in this life is subject to decay – nothing the Christian has or does, but this worm of pride will breed in it. Pride is most often responsible for the soft spots in our graces, which are highly perishable. It is not the nature of our grace, but the salt of God's covenant that preserves the purity of it.

In what ways, then, can a saint become proud of his grace?

First, *by relying on the strength of his grace.* To trust in the strength of your own goodness is to be proud of grace. In this way you refuse the poverty of spirit Christ so often commended (Matt. 5). We are called to acknowledge our own spiritual beggary and so to lean on Him for every need. Paul was such a man. He was not ashamed to let the whole world know that Christ carried his purse for him: *"Our sufficiency is of God"* (2 Cor. 3:5).

What happened to Peter when he bragged of the strength of his own grace? *"Although all shall be offended, yet will not I,"* Peter boasted (Mark 14:29). He set himself up for a race with the devil, and he fouled before he was even out of the gate. Christ in mercy let Satan trample Peter's own grace to show him its true nature and to dismount him from the height of his pride.

Pray that He will be as merciful to you if He sees you climbing the ladder of your own spiritual successes. Joab said to David, when he saw him growing proud of the strength of his kingdom and wanting to take a census, *"The Lord thy God add unto the people…an hundredfold…but why doth my lord the king delight in this thing?"* (2 Sam. 24:3). Can a groom be proud when he rides his master's horse, or a garden boast because the sun shines on it? Should we not say of every dram of goodness, as the young man of his hatchet, *"Alas, master, for it was borrowed"*? (2 Kgs. 6:5).

Count on the strength of your own godly attributes, and you will grow lax in your duties for Christ. Knowing you are weak keeps you from wandering too far from Him. When you see that your own cupboard is bare and everything you need is in His, you will go often to Him for supplies. But a soul who thinks he can take care of himself will say, "I have plenty and to spare for a long time. Let the doubting soul pray; my faith is strong. Let the weak go to God for help; I can manage fine on my own." What a sad state of affairs, to suppose that we no longer need the moment-by-moment sustaining grace of God.

Not only does overestimating the strength of our own goodness make us shun God's help, but it also makes us foolhardy and venturesome. You who boast about your spirituality are likely to put yourselves in all kinds of dangerous situations, then brag that you can handle them. You

Phoca PDF

think you are so established in the truth that a whole team of heretics could not draw you aside. You will go where no Christian ought to go, listen to what no Christian ought to hear – all the while insisting that though others may betray Christ in those circumstances, you never will. Peter showed this same foolish confidence on the eve of our Lord's crucifixion and how he came off, you know. His faith would have been slain on the spot if Christ had not rescued him with His look of love.

An arrogant confidence in the strength of your own grace will also make you critical and unsympathetic toward fellow Christians who are admittedly weak – and this is a most uncomely sin. *"If a man be overtaken in a fault,"* says Paul, *"ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness"* (Gal. 6:1). And if you wonder why you, who think you are so far above reproach, should stoop to help a fallen brother, here is an excellent reason: *"…considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted."*

God warns you against overconfident spirituality. What makes men unkind to the poor? They think they will never be so themselves. What makes Christians judge others harshly? They trust too much in their own goodness, thinking they could never fall. Bernard used to say, when he heard any scandalous sin of a brother, "He fell today; I may stumble tomorrow." Oh, that we all could have such a spirit of meekness!

A second way to become proud of our grace is by *relying on the worth of our grace* – thinking we can be good enough to please God. Scripture calls inherent grace our *"own righteousness"* and sets it in opposition to the righteousness of Christ, which alone is called the *"righteousness of God"* (Rom. 10:3). When we trust in our own grace, we exalt it above the grace of God. If it were in fact superior, then a saint could say when he gets to heaven, "This is the city which I built, which my grace purchased."

This would make God a tenant, and His creature the landlord! Ridiculous? Yet this is the very attitude we disclose when we set about to win God's acceptance through our own efforts. How does the God of the universe so patiently endure such pride in His lowly creatures!

If you understand God's Word at all, you know God has cast the order of our salvation into a method far different from working for it. It *is* a method of grace – but never our grace. Rather, it is God's divine grace. Any grace inherent in us has its place and office to *"accompany salvation"* (Heb. 6:9), but not to procure it. That is Christ's work, and His alone.

When Israel waited on the Lord at Mount Sinai, they had their bounds. Not a man was to come up the mountain to talk to God, except Moses. They were not even to touch the mount, or they would die. Here is a spiritual metaphor of our grace. All the graces are given to enhance our service to God, but none comes up to challenge *faith* as the basis for God's acceptance. Faith – unencumbered by works – is the grace that must present us to Christ for salvation and cleansing.

This doctrine of justification by faith has had more assaults made against it than any other teaching in Scripture. Indeed, many other errors were but the enemy's sly approaches to get nearer to undermine this one. When Satan cannot hide this truth, he works to hinder the practical application of it. Thus you see Christians who speak in defense of justification by faith,

Phoca PDF

yet their attitude and actions contradict their profession. Like Abraham, when he went in to Hagar, they try to accomplish God's purpose by a carnal plan. All these efforts that seem so noble are really baseborn, for they are rooted in pride.

At bottom, pride in your own abilities is what keeps you working for righteousness. You keep trying to pray harder, working to be a better Christian, laboring to have more faith. You keep telling yourself, "I can do it!" But you will soon find your own grace insufficient for even the smallest task, and your joy will run out at the crannies of your imperfect duties and weak graces. The language of pride hankers after the covenant of works. The only way out of this trap is to let the new covenant cut the cord of the old one, and acknowledge that the grace of Christ supersedes the works of the law.

Satan uses two types of pride to keep us trusting in the worth of our own grace. One I call a *mannerly pride;* the other, a *self-applauding pride.*

Mannerly pride tiptoes in, disguised as humility. This is the soul that weeps and mourns for its vile condition, yet refuses to be comforted. It is true – not one of us can paint our sins black enough to do them justice. But think how you discredit God's mercy and Christ's merit when you say they are not enough to buy your pardon! Can you find no better way to show your sense of sin than to malign the Savior? Are you unwilling to be in Christ's debt for your salvation, or too proud to beg His forgiveness?

It is horrible pride for a beggar to starve rather than take alms from a rich man, or for a condemned criminal to choose death rather than accept pardon from the hand of a compassionate ruler. Yet here is something worse – for a soul pining and perishing in sin to reject the mercy of God and the helping hand of Christ to save him. God says there is not a soul He cannot save. If you continue in your self-effacing way, you call Him a liar. You have been tricked into believing your tears are a stronger purgative than Christ's blood.

Another form of spiritual pride that shows you are depending on the worth of your own grace is *self-applauding pride.* This is when the heart is secretly lifted up and says of itself, "I may not be perfect, but I'm certainly better than most Christians I know." Every such glance of the soul's eye is adulterous – in fact, idolatrous. Any time you give your own righteousness the inward worship of your confidence and trust, this is great iniquity indeed. You come to open heaven's gate with the old key, when God has put on a new lock.

If you are truly a Christian, you must acknowledge that your first entrance into your justified state was by pure mercy. You were *"justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"* (Rom. 3:24). Having been reconciled, to whom are you now indebted – to your own goodness, to your obedience, to yourself – or to Christ? If Christ does not lead in all you do, you are sure to find the door of grace shut to you. *"The righteousness of God [is] revealed from faith to faith… [for] the just shall live by faith"* (Rom. 1:17). We are not only made alive by Christ, but we live by Christ. Heaven's way is paved with grace and mercy from beginning to end.

Why is God so insistent that we use His grace instead of our own? Because He knows our grace is inadequate for the task. The truth is this: trusting in your own grace only brings trouble

Phoca PDF

and heartache; trusting in God's grace brings lasting peace and joy.

In the first place, trusting in your own goodness will eventually destroy it. Inherent grace is weak. Force it to endure the yoke of the law, and sooner or later it will faint by the wayside, unequal to the task of pulling the heavy load of your old nature. What you need is Christ's yoke, but you cannot take it until you shed the one that harnesses you to works.

This is done by renouncing *every* expectation from yourself. If you are one of those who have claimed for years to be a Christian, but you see little fruit in your life, perhaps you should dig down to the root of your profession and find out whether the seed you planted was cultivated in the barren soil of legalism. If so, pull it up at once, and replant your soul in a fertile field – God's mercy. David gave an account of how he came to prosper when some who were rich and famous suddenly withered and died: *"Lo,"* he said, *"this is the man that made not God his strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches…but I am like a green olive tree in the house of God: I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever"* (Psa. 52:7-8).

Not only do you crush your grace by making it carry the burden of your salvation, but you also deprive yourself of true comfort in Christ. Gospel comfort springs from a Gospel root, which is Christ. *"We are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh"* (Phil. 3:3). The first step to receiving Gospel comfort is to send away all comforters of our own. A physician asks his patient to stop going to every other doctor who has been tampering with his health, and trust him for a cure. As your spiritual physician, the Holy Spirit asks your soul to send away all the old practitioners – every duty, every other course of obedience – and lean only on Him.

Does your soul cry out from its depths for inward peace? Then check to see what vessel you are drawing your comfort from. If it is the vessel of your own sufficiency, the supply is finite and will soon run dry. It is mixed, or diluted, and therefore not very nourishing. Above all, it is stolen if you claim it as your own and do not acknowledge it as God's gift to you. Now how much comfort can you expect from stolen goods? And how foolish to play the thief when your Father has so much more and better to give than you could pilfer in a lifetime! What clever deceit of Satan – to make us willing to steal, but too proud to beg mercy at God's hand.

– From *The Christian in Complete Armour, Volume One* by William Gurnall. This excerpt reprinted by permission of Banner of Truth, P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, PA 17013.

William Gurnall (1616-1679) was a highly esteemed Puritan preacher and writer.

Phoca PDF