

Pride is a double-edged sword. We want to take pride in our work and always put forth our best effort. Parents often show a positive pride when their children have accomplished something good. The Second Vatican Council even noted that other things being equal, Gregorian chant should be given pride of place in liturgical services (SC 116). Pride tempered with humility is something we should strive for.

Jesus warns us to avoid a sinful pride. He tells the parable of the Pharisee who prays in silence: “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous — or even like this tax collector” (Lk 18:11). Elsewhere, Jesus strips the pride away from the Pharisees as he corrects them for being pretentious: “Woe to you ... Pharisees, you hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and every kind of filth. Even so, on the outside you appear righteous, but inside you are filled with hypocrisy and evildoing” (Mt 23:27-28).

The opposite of pride is humility. Jesus upholds the tax collector who “stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner’” (Lk 18:13). The full prayer of the remorseful tax collector is from Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love; in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions. Thoroughly wash away my guilt; and from my sin cleanse me. For I know my transgressions; my sin is always before me” (3:5). In holding the tax collector up to us as a repentant sinner, Jesus is teaching us that our fundamental attitude must be the recognition of our sinfulness and complete trust in God’s gracious mercy.

Following the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Luke offers several short lessons that further illustrate pride and humility:

- The disciples exhibit too much pride when they attempt to push children away from Jesus. Jesus counters that the Kingdom of God belongs to the children. We need the trust and the humility of a child to accept Jesus.
- A rich official asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. He is proud that he has kept all of the commandments. His pride gets in the way of following Jesus. Jesus asks him to sell everything he has to give to the poor, but he is unwilling to let go. He does not trust God enough to do this.
- “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Lk 18:25). One interpretation of this verse is that to pass through a narrow gate, a camel could not be carrying anything on his back. On its knees, and with no load, the camel could make it through the narrow passage. When we are on our knees in prayer and rely totally on God, we are in a humbler position to enter the kingdom.
- Jesus tells the Twelve Apostles of his impending passion and death. Jesus will be stripped and beaten and killed but he will rise on the third day. Jesus is humble enough to let go of everything. There is no pride in him as he predicts his passion and death for the third time. The Twelve are blind, they do not understand.
- Finally, Jesus encounters a blind beggar in Jericho. Here again, the prideful push away the humble one who seeks to come before Jesus. “The people ... rebuked him, telling him to be silent, but he kept calling out all the more, “Son of David, have pity on me!” Jesus heals the blind beggar who manifests enough faith to move Jesus to help him.

I am reminded of the lyrics to a country western song that echoes Jesus’s parable: “Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way. I can't wait to look in the mirror 'cause I get better lookin' each day.” Indeed, we do need to look in the mirror but with an understanding of what Jesus is trying to teach us: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 18:14).