

I began my sermon last week with a trivia question; this morning I'd like to begin with a riddle. Riddle me this:

“There is one [corruption] in humanity of which no one is free; which every one in the world despises when they see it in someone else... There is no fault which makes a person more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.”¹

What is the answer to my riddle? **Pride**.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote a brilliant chapter about pride that he entitled “The Great Sin”. In it he described pride as being essentially competitive in nature. Lewis writes, “Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next [person]. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.”²

If pride's first expression is comparison, then pride's second expression is self-sufficiency. Comparison elevates self and reduces others; self-sufficiency elevates self and reduces God. Both come at a cost; both come with a warning.

Proverbs 16:18 says, “*Pride precedes destruction; an arrogant spirit gives way to a nasty fall.*” As we turn our attention back to the Book of Daniel, we look to chapter 4, and here we see a God's-Eye-View into the mind of King Nebuchadnezzar. He was the most powerful ruler of his day but his pride and self-importance ultimately led to a nasty fall from power.

Nebuchadnezzar is like most of us—he learned the lessons of humility and dependence the hard way. As we look to his story this morning, I am praying that we will hear echoes of our own. It's never too late to turn to God in humility and dependence—it's never too late because He never stops waiting for our return. At this time, I want to invite you to open your Bibles, paper or electronic, to Daniel 4.

Similar to Daniel 2, a dream and its interpretation dominates chapter 4, but the way chapter 4 begins and ends tells us that something unusual is going on. What we have in chapter 4 is a letter of sorts—a royal decree from Nebuchadnezzar to the nations. The content of the decree are shocking—the king proclaims God's name to the entire empire—and it's more than theology, it's his own personal testimony. Chapter 4 begins and ends with praise, and I'm going to begin by reading the first 3 verses.

“King Nebuchadnezzar, To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth: May you prosper greatly! It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, “The Great Sin”.

² Ibid.

Most High God has performed for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.”

This is the last chapter in which Nebuchadnezzar appears and his comments reveal how far he has come in his understanding of God, and, in his understanding of his own limits. Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest king on earth, but he came to recognize that God’s Kingdom and Kingship, was vastly superior to his own—he learned an important lesson in humility. The rest of chapter 4 tells us about this lesson.

As I said, a dream and its interpretation dominates chapter 4. Verse 10—while the king was lying in bed, he had a vision of *“a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. 11 The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. 12 Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.”*

As he continued to dream, a messenger from God came from heaven, declaring, vs. 14, *“Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. 15 But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. 16 Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.”*

Nebuchadnezzar was given one clue as to the meaning of his dream—we find it in vs. 17. *“The decision is announced...so that the living may know that the Most High [God] is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone He wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.”*

The dream troubled Nebuchadnezzar and so he called for Daniel, and once again, God revealed the interpretation. Here are the main points:

1. The towering tree represents King Nebuchadnezzar—he had no earthly equal with respect to wealth or power; his kingdom spanned the known world. It’s interesting to note that the Hebrew word for “pride” means to “tower high above,” “to be tall,” and implies a sense of looking down on those who are “beneath” you.
2. Nebuchadnezzar, the towering tree, would be cut down to size. You may have noticed that the dominant metaphor changes part way through the dream. The towering tree becomes a wild beast, it is bound, but it turns out that this beast is actually a human being that has been deprived of its senses.³ The king would live among the beasts for seven “times.”
3. The reason for the coming fall was Nebuchadnezzar’s pride—he refused to acknowledge that God—not he—was sovereign over heaven and earth.
4. And finally, the remaining stump and roots picture a time when Nebuchadnezzar’s mental faculties and his kingship would be

³ John Goldingay, *Word Biblical Commentary: Daniel*, 92.

restored. He would be restored upon his confession of God's ultimate authority.

In verse 27, Daniel concludes the interpretation with a plea: "*Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.*" In other words, it's not too late, there is still time to turn to God. This is consistent with the message of the Scriptures—either we humble ourselves, or, God will do the humbling for us. Verse 28 and following moves us from interpretation, to fulfilment, to restoration.

"All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes."

33 Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

34 At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives forever.

'His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. 35 All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"'

36 At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honour and splendour were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble."

Application: In the time remaining, I want to move into an application of the text, and I want to begin with the following observation. While there is much about our world that is very different from Nebuchadnezzar's, 26 centuries later, the human condition remains the same. If my definition of pride is accurate—with its two key expressions being comparison (I'm better than you) and self-sufficiency (I don't need you)—**then how prevalent is pride in our West Coast culture?**

The Bible teaches that pride isn't just bad—it's bad for us. I want to take a few moments to demonstrate why. Let's begin by looking at pride as comparison.

1. Pride as comparison (I'm better than you).

I got involved in long distance running many years ago—10 km's led to half-marathons, which led to marathons. When I first began, I didn't know anything about developing my aerobic engine, I just tried to run farther and faster than I had the time before. I began to get fitter and faster and my love for competition led me to start entering local road races. As my times started to come down, my pride began to swell.

Remember what Lewis said—pride is essentially competitive in nature—I wasn't proud of being fit or fast, I was proud of being fitter and faster than the people around me. I ran my first half marathon in Banff, Alberta, and I was feeling very confident about my fitness. When the gun went off, I took off and before long settled into my pace.

Around the 5 km mark, a young woman blew by me like I was standing still, but not so fast that I didn't get a good look at her. She was about my height, she was wearing a cotton t-shirt, baggy basketball shorts, and the wrong kind of shoes. She didn't look like a runner. In that moment I made a judgement—*she isn't a serious runner like me*. And I said to myself, *I'll see her again—in a few km's, gasping for air by the side of the road*.

As it turned out, I did see her again. We were in a long out and back section—she was a kilometre from the finishing line and I still had 3 kilometres to go. She looked strong and powerful, and if I looked even remotely like I felt, I looked ready to collapse. As she blew by my once more, I cringed. I came across a quote this week that was

rather fitting—“Sometimes you need to suck it up and swallow your pride...thank God it's non-fattening!”

Competition is intrinsic to sport—one team wins and another team loses. But this comparison becomes dangerous when the categories of “winners” and “losers” bleeds over into the rest of life. It is a short journey from “*I'm better at something than you*” to “*I'm better than you*.” Comparison often moves from a simple evaluation to a sinister judgement about who is valuable (and who isn't), who is important (and who isn't), who is significant (and who isn't).

I want to direct your attention back to the text, to verse 27. Daniel concludes his interpretation by pleading with the king: *Your Majesty, please accept my advice: Renounce your sin—the sin of pride—by doing what is right. Renounce your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that God will prevent this calamity from befalling you.*

Verse 27 makes a connection between pride and the lack of kindness to the oppressed; elsewhere, the Bible makes a connection between pride and oppression itself.

In verse 30, Nebuchadnezzar's pride was on display—he gloried in the splendour of Babylon. It's historical fact that Nebuchadnezzar was a prolific builder; Babylon contained two of the ancient wonders of the world—the Hanging Gardens and the City Walls. The outer walls ran 16 kilometres in length, measured 25 feet thick, and were said to tower 320 feet over the city—these two were considered inspiring, architectural, wonders.

There are others of course: the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids, and the Colosseum in Rome. The question is, what do these architectural wonders say about the kings who commissioned them? How many thousands of slaves died during the construction of the great walls of Babylon? How many lives were spent constructing the Hanging Gardens? Did it matter to Nebuchadnezzar? The beauty of the Hanging Gardens obscured the ugliness of pride—thousands of lives considered worthless, insignificant, and expendable.

Pride often leads to oppression; it elevates self and reduces others. Pride leads us to treat people—who have been made in God’s image—as less important, less valuable, and less significant than they are. **Pride isn’t just bad, it’s bad for us, and others.** The question is, *where has our pride led us to make judgements about the value of others?* Let’s move on to talk about the second expression of pride...

2. Pride as self-sufficiency (I don’t need you). If comparison elevates self and reduces others, then self-sufficiency elevates self and reduces God.

From his palace rooftop, Nebuchadnezzar looked out across the city, surveyed his achievements, and marvelled at his own greatness—**this is mine, all mine!** Verse 30, *“Is not this the great Babylon **I** have built as the royal residence, by **my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?**”*

Nebuchadnezzar’s power and wealth led to a self-sufficiency, which in turn led to a blurring of the lines between the Creator and the created. He made his way through life as though he was a god on earth. *Look at what I have accomplished! Look at what I control!* Last week I spoke about modern day idolatry. Almost anyone or anything can serve as a counterfeit god in our lives. An idol is anything that has become more important to us than God. An idol is anyone or anything that we trust to provide us with what only God can provide.⁴

I said last week that the traditional notion of God has been replaced by the god of this age—the god of self. Making a god of self leads predictably to self-worship and self-sufficiency. Self-worship leads to self-importance (I’m more important than you), and self-sufficiency leads to a blindness about the true nature of reality—all that we are, all that we have, our ability to accomplish anything, comes as a gift from God’s hand.

My Old Testament professor, Iain Provain once said that pride is the fundamental human error. When we forget who God is, it is only a short step to forgetting who we are, and who our neighbour is—this leads to a breakdown in society. Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride precedes destruction; an arrogant spirit gives way to a nasty fall.” **Pride isn’t just bad, it’s bad for us.** Nebuchadnezzar confused himself with God and in the end he had to become like a wild beast in order to learn that he was only human.⁵

⁴ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, Introduction, xviii.

⁵ Fewell, *Circle of Sovereignty*, 101; as quoted by Tremper Longman III, *NIV Application: Daniel*, 122.

There is another way to live, a radical alternative to comparison and self-sufficiency; Jesus shows us the way.

Jesus is an enigma to many in the West. He is recognized as a wise moral teacher. He is admired for His practice of compassion and non-violence, and those who believe in miracles applaud the way He healed the sick. But most people have no desire to follow Him, or anyone else. Self-fulfillment is seen to be the highest good and the ultimate aim—what could be better than calling my own shots and getting what I want out of life?

The question is, *does self-importance or self-sufficiency lead to self-fulfillment?* We can feed the monster of self day and night for decades, only to find that its hunger is never satisfied—its thirst is never quenched. What we need is freedom from the tyranny of self.

Jesus models a radical alternative, a radical posture, a willingness to lived with open hands before God the Father. The only other posture available to us is that of willfulness—living with our arms crossed. A willing person prays “*Your will, Your way God;*” a willful persons says “*My way, or no way*”.

I said earlier that the Hebrew word for “pride” means to “tower high above,” and implies a sense of looking down on those “beneath” you. Jesus models the way of humility. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Humility isn’t thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.” This is what we see when we look at Jesus.

Philippians 2:3-8 says, “*Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.*”

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross.”

In the words of Phil Wickham, “What other king leaves his throne? What other king leaves his glory to die?” The humility of Jesus was good for us—it led Him to the cross where He rescues us from sin, brokenness, and death.

When we follow in the way of Jesus, humility is good for us and for others. Humility is good for us because it keeps us grounded in the true nature of reality. God is infinitely superior to us in every way—He is the Creator and we are the created, and every person has been crafted in His image.

Now what effect would it have in our church, and on the North Shore, if we embraced this way of humility? It would lead to radical embrace. The message of the cross is that it doesn’t matter what you accomplish or produce, it doesn’t matter who your parents were, where you were born, what you have, or what you’ve done—because you were created by God, you matter to Him, you are valuable, and significant. Jesus considered you worth dying for.

If that’s the message of the cross, what is the message of the church? Here’s the message—because you matter to God, you matter to us, and there is a place at the family table with your name on it. You don’t have to get your life together to become a part of this church. You don’t have to have everything figured out. You don’t have to be

problem free. The invitation of the church is, *come as you are, let's follow Jesus together, and trust Him for the healing and transformation along the way.*

Benediction

Which way will you choose? The way of competitive comparison and self-sufficiency, or the way of Jesus? One leads to life, the other leads to a nasty fall—choose wisely the path before you.

Pray

Worship Response

In a moment I will speak a final word of blessing, but before I do, I want to remind you that next Sunday we will be celebrating the Lord's Supper together and we plan to take time at the conclusion of the service to pray for anyone who would like to ask the Lord for healing.

Last month we had someone come forward for prayer who had fractured ribs; her pain was quite severe. She asked our prayer ministry team to pray for her ribs, and they did, but they also prayed for a need that was on her heart that she hadn't shared with anyone. God knows what we need before we ask, and God answered both prayers! Her ribs felt better the next day, and, God also answered her unspoken request, supernaturally providing for someone she cares about very deeply.

Your need may be physical, or relational, or emotional—prepare your heart this week and then come next Sunday and we will pray for your healing.