

Five Ways to Wage War on the Ego

“He must [by the very nature of things] increase, but I must decrease.” (John the Baptist)

One of the most clever things I’ve read in any fiction work is in *The Screwtape Letters* with the uncle advising the nephew to get his Christian to realize he’s being humble because then – voilà! – he’s automatically prideful. Countless Christians I’ve spoken to have picked up on this irony in joke form by declaring, as if they are the first to ever do so, “I’m so proud of my humility!”

I start with that because I fully confess that by sharing thoughts about how not to be prideful that when people put them into practice, they can absolutely be proud of their effort and ruin the whole thing. Humility and pride are so unique and tricky that way.

So no, I’m not trying to advocate ways to appear humble while you get a big head in your heart of hearts. But the Bible at various times and in various ways tells us to be humble. So I think a strategy is prudent. Here are five to consider:

1. Keep your good deeds private

I have spoken to this one before. Yet Facebook is such a constant assault on this, I find myself wanting to shout this from the rooftops. Making your good deeds known to others can be (and probably is) in direct violation of Jesus’ command to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Yet on social media, we act like this isn’t an issue. We brag

about something we accomplished, the likes and affirmations come pouring in and it all seems like a normal part of our culture.

Granted, I will not cast stones on this because I have learned, like others, how to creatively do it where it doesn't look like bragging. Just post a picture of some great deed you are doing. People love pictures, right? Then you don't have to brag with words. But people still know how great you are. Yes, I've been there.

Until we get to the place where we are secure enough in our identity as a servant of Christ who works for an audience of one, we will live in direct disobedience to Christ's command to keep our good works private. Especially on social media. And myself included.

2. Overwhelm complaining with thanksgiving

Here is one I really struggle with. My wife and closest friends will confirm this. Everyone on Twitter is an idiot. Our extended Winter this year is just the worst. Chicago traffic turns me into an ogre of rage and criticism. Even the woman who leads the workout videos my wife does is not safe from my ire, even though she is a successful woman, in much better shape than me, and doesn't deserve my insults.

It's all an ugly manifestation of how proud I am. Because I'm either only thinking of myself or I'm putting myself above others. By contrast, outside of November, my attitude of thankfulness is anemic. Yet of the two things, only one is commanded as something we are to do in all circumstances.

Criticism is at times warranted in Christianity. And we all need to vent at times. I am not advocating to avoid it completely. I just think some of us could stand to have our comments and actions of thanksgiving outnumber our complaints

and insults about 10 to 1, or some similar percentage. Maybe getting specific will help: Trying to open our day by thanking for ten straight minutes or by handwriting thank you notes often or by showing a person how thankful you are with a simple gesture. It will choke our pride at a very sensitive point.

3. Associate with people who know more than you

The Bible warns that knowledge puffs us up. This can be seen so clearly when people attend college or grad school or seminary, or even when they are educated in any way on any subject. If we are knowledgeable in some way and proud as a result, it makes sense to me that exposure to those who know more than we do will help keep us in a more sober and humble state of mind.

A few years ago I began studying textual criticism, the art-science of trying to scour through nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts and countless other sources to determine the original wording of the New Testament books. I have learned quite a bit about it. But I also belong to a Facebook page on the topic, where some of the world's foremost experts post. And I have to admit: they can talk circles around me and some have written hundreds and hundreds of pages on it. And some of what they say in their books I do not understand.

It is similar with the languages and cultures around us. I have little doubt it is easy to get frustrated with how other people think and behave and what language they speak when it is different from ours because it annoys us. But God taught me a few years ago that exposure to and appreciation for what I don't know keeps me from being proud of what I do. So when people speak Russian on the Chicago bus, by God's grace I hope this reminder of how big the world is and how small my knowledge is will keep me humble.

4. Associate with people who have less than you

I have also written about this before, but Jesus once taught to throw parties for the crippled and blind instead of for your own family and friends. In that same chapter, Jesus talks about people making excuses as to why they cannot follow him and then concludes the chapter by saying that if anyone wants to follow him they have to forsake everything. What I take from that is that our richness in material possessions and relationship cause us to forget how badly we need God. And the antidote is to rub shoulders with people who do not have much in the way of material possessions and relationship.

Why? Because part of our social makeup as humans is to become like whoever we are closest to. This is why my dad always told me "You are who your friends are." And so I think Jesus wants us to learn humility from those who live humbly by little to no choice in the matter.

5. Daily choose forgiveness over bitterness and vindication.

This one is crucial because it is a potent weapon against the "proud of your humility" threat. If you are forgiving because of how much Christ forgave you, as he taught in Matthew 18:21-35 and other places, then you are not confused by how bad a person you are. And yet you are not wallowing in your sinfulness but being proactive in trying to live out the grace that has been given.

Bitterness and vindication are the opposite. They take no account of how bad we as the victim are and do nothing productive or proactive in living out grace or mercy. Retaliating also manifests a spirit that trusts self over God, who vows that revenge only belongs to him.

To be clear, when a person is wronged in the worst ways, I will be careful (especially soon after the event) in counseling them on how and when to forgive. Yet, in reading stories like Joseph in Genesis and Corrie Ten Boom in more modern times, I think there is an authority in their words to teach that even those abused in the worst ways can forgive by the grace of the Christian God. And the worst act of injustice in human history – an innocent man being humiliated, tortured and killed for the very people who killed him – is the message and heart of this humble way of living.

So by trying to live out biblical forgiveness daily (which is indeed more a process than an event in my experience because I often think “I forgive that person” and then the memories come back one day and I have to do it again) I will disintegrate my ego. Because I can't think on and react to God's grace and be proud at the same time. And by forgiving because I've been forgiven, that is what I am doing.

What do you think? Comments are welcomed below.

Here Where Dogs Bite and Bees Sting: Part One

And predators eat prey. Tornadoes destroy. Disease wastes and kills. The sun blisters. Hangnails, well, hang. And so on and so forth. Everything that lives is in the process of dying. The imperfection of nature is expressed in a hundred billion ways throughout the universe every day.

A large chunk of humankind has assumed this as all God's fault, an injustice that our supposedly good, all-powerful God is not remedying which therefore makes Him evil and/or a powerless God. There are so many things wrong with that line of thinking.

I think to fully understand it—even remotely—you must look and think closely about some biblical teachings and concepts. This three-part series will look at 1) how the problem began, 2) life with the problem, 3) and how the problem will end. It will not be a thorough look at the issue. Not even close. The subject is way too complex for that and has been the subject of whole books. Rather this is mainly a general overview.

It all started when the free will of man and pride met to create the biggest human moral problem in the universe. Although this article is not specifically looking at the problem it created in the human heart, the human moral problem is where the whole issue started so we will look at that first.

The Corruption of Free Will

So about this thing called free will. Like everything else, God created it to be a good thing. But also like everything else it can be made into a bad thing. C.S. Lewis says "If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad...Why, then, did God give them [us] free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible...makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having" (Mere Christianity, 48).

The big baddie himself, Satan, was good once but may have been the first to warp God's gift of free will. God created and made him the top angel in His kingdom, but this wasn't good enough and he chose rebellion. And then he later convinced Adam and Eve on behalf of humankind to choose to rebel too. And evil has since infected all of mankind.

Evil comes in many guises. It does not always look evil or

self-centered. In fact, it can be born of a desire to do something good. Tolkien commented on this very thing. Tolkien was not only one of the greatest Fantasy writers who ever lived, but he was also a very great Christian thinker who was instrumental in converting Lewis, his best friend, to Christ.

Tolkien believed that evil is good in its originally created form. In a letter to a prospective publisher, Tolkien related how he viewed evil: "...frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others—speedily and according to the benefactor's own plans" (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 146). Yes, evil can either look good or as previously mentioned originate in a good source. Throughout his masterpiece, The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien demonstrates his view that at one time the forces of evil were originally intended by their creator to be good. Morgoth, Saruman, Sauron, Gollum—such evil forces were created good but chose to be corrupted. And trolls, orcs, and the Nazgul were originally created good ents, elves, and men, but were corrupted by evil.

Evil is also a force both outside of man and within man. At various times in history, there have been well-meaning individuals who postulated that there is either internal evil which is evil that arises in each of us or there is an evil force outside of us that makes us choose evil. Tolkien said there is both. He demonstrated this dual nature of evil in The Lord of The Rings. Through the ring, Frodo, the ring bearer, is tempted both internally and externally by the dark lord Sauron.

Frodo came to recognize, respect, and at times resist this seductive force as demonstrated in the valley of Minas Morgul in the presence of the witch-king:

"...he felt, more urgent than ever before, the command that he should put on the Ring. But great as the pressure was, he felt no

inclination

now to yield to it...There was no longer any answer to that command

in his own will, dismayed by terror though it was, and he felt only the

beating upon him of a great power from outside. It took his hand, and

as Frodo watched with his mind, not willing it but in suspense (as if he

looked on some story far away), it moved the hand inch by inch towards

the chain upon his neck. Then his own will stirred; slowly it forced the hand back..."

(Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, 315-316)

In all its forms, evil is evil. if it is opposite of God's expressed will, that's exactly what it is. It does not matter if any man judges something to be good. Anything that is contradictory to God is evil.

The fact that God gave us entirely free wills to either choose or to reject this evil almost makes it amazing that He was able to have a plan at all. almost. Not really, though. God is divine and all-knowing of the past, present, and future so it's actually not that surprising. In His infinite knowledge, He was able to plan the entire redemptive history of man before creation even got started. The Apostle Paul spoke of a mystery, a hidden wisdom, that God ordained before the world began (1 Corinthians 2:7). The salvation act of Jesus Christ, God the Son who was God the Father, was the planned end result of all of this, but the free wills of man were left free. God knew what would we choose and planned accordingly.

Via God's long plan of salvation, we have been enabled to exert our free will again to begin the process of being returned to our perfect state one day. Frodo was eventually able to exert his free will to the good and thusly destroy the

overpowering ring. That kind of exertion of our free will is necessary to begin the process of turning back the damage caused by the original corruption in the Garden of Eden. We'll come back to that in the last part of this series.

For now, all of mankind is burdened with evil. Adam and Eve made their horrible choice and because of it man was cursed. But their bad choice affected more than just humanity. Their error also cursed the rest of creation with imperfection. Adam and Eve eventually died in a world that was increasingly hard to care for, in a land that they had had a hand in corrupting. In the second part of this series we will look at that corruption.

Read Part Two [here](#).

Read Part Three [here](#).

Learning to Love at Chuck E. Cheese's

I wrote the majority of this post eight years ago. I used to have a personal blog where I would review movies and albums, talk about sports, and rant about bad drivers. You know...the basics. Occasionally, I would delve into something a bit more "important." When I wrote this, I had recently been to a birthday party for a fully grown human man at Chuck E. Cheese's. Yes, you read that correctly. A grown up – an adult – chose to have their birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese's. Eight years later and I am still having problems fully processing that fact, which only reinforces in my mind the need to revisit this post. As you will see below, there is a streak of judgmental superiority running through me that needs

confronting on a nearly daily basis.

I hate Chuck E. Cheese's. Hate is not a strong enough word. I loathe it in totality. It is a loud, unpleasant, wasteful, soul sucking place that is devoid of anything remotely approaching decent, let alone good. It attracts the loudest, most unpleasant, most wasteful, soulless people in the world. They come in throngs, like Uruk Hai on their way to Helm's Deep. (Nerdy Lord of the Rings reference for the uninitiated.) The patrons coalesce to form a massive, grotesque new organism that heats up the room and fouls the air with its presence. It is a destination I would not wish upon my worst enemy.

Yet I am worse. I am proud. I am arrogant. I am full of disdain. I do not love like I should. Jesus said to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and if I believe that to be true then I am not measuring up. No. Scratch that. I am face first, firmly on the ground. I haven't even started the process of measuring up. I've known for some time that I am not a people person and I joke about it regularly. "I don't like people" has escaped my lips many times. It's all said in jest, of course, but deep down a part of me knows that it is true. Pathetically true. I am a Pharisee. I am convinced of my own worth and abilities and I am blind to the valuable human life right next to me. To my eyes, that Chuck E. Cheese's patron doesn't look like much on the outside, but inside, God created that annoying person playing Skee Ball in His image. That person is eternally valuable to God. He loves them enough that He died for them. And I look at them like they are beneath me – a waste of my time and energy!

If I am going to learn how to truly love my neighbor, then more visits to Chuck E. Cheese's* are in order. If I can love people there, I can love them anywhere.

*Perhaps your Chuck E. Cheese's is CiCi's Pizza. Or Ryan's Steakhouse. Or McDonald's. Or Walmart. You get the point. It could be anywhere.

“From Birth, A King Without Dignity”

...Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva... [Mark 7:33]

A Birth Without Dignity

It has always struck me deeply that it was likely that Jesus was born in the presence of more animals than people.

Where were the kings to see him right after he was born? Where were the high priests? The prophets? The nobles? The governors? When my wife and I (hopefully) are able to have a child through pregnancy, that child will be celebrated and made over as if he or she were royalty. Yet Jesus was not. At least not for several months.

I mean, God is sovereign and no doubt controlled the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. He enabled a virgin to get pregnant, convinced Joseph to stay with her and moved them to Bethlehem to fulfill a several hundred years old prophecy. So why were Mary and Joseph relegated to such undignified quarters that Jesus was laid in a feeding trough for animals? Isn't this the King of the Jews and the God of Christianity we are talking about here?

From before moment one of his life, God shows us through Jesus how little human dignity matters to him.

What does dignity mean to you?

A Life Without Dignity

Beyond the Manger we see Jesus living without dignity. For him to have left Heaven where he was worshiped 24 hours a day by millions of angels, other beings and most of creation to come live among us was a loss of dignity in and of itself. But he didn't come as a Heavenly King to be an earthly king. No, he came to be poor (2 Corinthians 8:9) and homeless (Luke 9:58). He came to serve his followers as the lowest slave would (John 13:1-17). He came to teach people that when you are insulted in the most offensive way possible, you don't fight back but rather take the completely undignified response and let them get away with it (Matthew 5:38-43).

He came to be misunderstood and rejected and mistreated by even his own family.

What does dignity mean to you?

A Death Without Dignity

Again, I'm entirely certain God controlled the timing and circumstances of when Jesus was on Earth and that Jesus did not have to live during the time when Romans had mastered the art of humiliating a person before they killed them.

It wasn't just an excruciating way to die. It was being mocked with a crown of thorns, being spat upon, being paraded around almost entirely naked in full view of the world. It was being whipped so badly his appearance was marred beyond recognition. I think it is fair to say that Jesus died with as little dignity as possible. By means of torture, shame and death reserved for the worst criminals, people we know deserve dignity the least. I think God wanted it this way. It was for this reason Paul said, I think, that Jesus was obedient unto

death, "even death on a cross."

How odd is it that Jesus' amazing, supernaturally conceived birth was so private and yet his horrific, dehumanizing death was so public?

What does dignity mean to you?

The story of Christmas, the true, historical story of Christmas, is never as pleasant as we want it to be[1. As ["Labor of Love" by Andrew Peterson](#) captures so well.]. It was a story of being overlooked. Of being discarded to living with the animals. Of being born without dignity. And it was not by accident. It was the pattern for the rest of his life, even unto death.

So yet again, I ask, *what does dignity mean to you?* Do you desire it? Do you react vindictively when it is taken from you, even slightly? I know I do. To Jesus it apparently was not high on his list of human values. It was God's plan for him and I'm certain it is his plan for us.

So this Christmas if someone curses us in traffic, if we somehow get overlooked or underappreciated, if family mistreats us, if in anyway we feel our dignity being threatened...let us remember the baby lying where animals fed. Let us remember that in the same passage above where Jesus was obedient unto the most humiliating death we are told to "have this attitude in you which was also in Christ Jesus". We know Christmas is not about the festive secular aspects primarily, that it's about Jesus. May this Christmas we live as he did, even if it costs us some dignity.

Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord

In 1960-62 Miss Sophie Graham was a Bible teacher at Swannanoa Elementary School, Swannanoa, North Carolina, when I was in 5th and 6th grades. She was a missionary in China prior to the Communist takeover, and when I knew her she lived in retirement in Montreat, North Carolina. Miss Graham was one of the best teachers I have ever seen, bar none. She could teach the Bible! Amazingly, she could hold the attention of children ten to twelve years old. She certainly held mine. And we learned so much! One week, she taught a passage I've never, ever forgotten: Jeremiah 9:23-24 *"Let, not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth, glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercises judgment, justice and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight," saith the Lord.*

Over the years I've taken that passage and taught and preached it on several occasions. Some tremendous truths emerge, ultimately culminating in what Jeremiah and the Apostle Paul[1. 1 Corinthians 1:31] stated "Let him that glorieth, glory in the Lord." Our glory, our boasting, our trust is ALL to be in Him.

First of all, some thoughts that stand out to me after 56 years thinking back to Miss Sophie Graham and the Jeremiah passage.

The importance of Scripture memorization. To be honest, I don't remember if Miss Graham tried to have us memorize the

passage, though I rather think she did. The point is, Scripture was written to be learned, even memorized. Fanatical, dedicated Muslims memorize the entire Koran. Why can't we followers of Jesus learn many more verses than we do?

The example of a godly teacher. I was blessed to have good and godly Sunday teachers all the way from childhood. Their commitment to Christ and their example cannot be overstated in terms of the impact it can have on a young person.

The principles of the passage itself deserves a second look, that's what I want to do now:

1. **It's not what we know; we don't know enough.** ("Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom.") Education, learning, and knowledge are important, but we'll never know enough; we need the Lord's wisdom. In 1799 George Washington was sick. He had served two terms as the first president of the United States. Now retired, he was 67, when he became ill. His doctors recommended "bleeding" him, a common practice at the time. It was thought that getting rid of the "bad" blood would help bring healing. However, Washington, in a severely weakened condition died, apparently of pneumonia. Antibiotics could have cured him. Human knowledge didn't go far enough. We will never know enough, compared to God. That's why God's revelation to us is so vital.
2. **It's not what you can do (might or power); we aren't powerful enough.** ("Neither let the mighty man glory in his might.") Goliath was a 9-foot giant, probably stronger than any other human on earth in his day. Yet his "might" was not enough to guarantee him a victory; David felled him with a sling and a stone and cut off his head with Goliath's own sword. How many victories did God give His people when it seemed impossible, when they were outnumbered many times over? II Chronicles 20 tells of an amazing victory God gave Jehoshaphat and Judah in which Jehoshaphat put the choir in front of the

army! Do not glory in your own might, power, or ability.

3. **It's not what we have; we don't have enough.** ("Let not the rich man glory in his riches.") (Psalm 49 declares that we carry nothing away when we die (vs. 17), and that those who trust in their wealth and boast in the multitude of their riches, cannot redeem their brother (vs.6-7). He (not we) owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Jesus said that a man's "life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses (Luke 12:15).
4. **Money can't buy happiness, health, success, or salvation.** If wealth is ultimately so powerless, why should we place our confidence in it? Rather, it's in understanding and knowing Him that we are to glory, to boast.
5. **We are to boast in the fact that He is the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth.** These are the things He delights in. We are to boast in Him; He is to be our heart's passion and desire, and the source of our confidence.

G.K. Chesterson was out on an English countryside sketching pictures using colored chalks. He was frustrated to realize he had brought no white chalk. Suddenly he started laughing with uncontrolled delight when he realized that the ground underneath him was porous limestone – a perfect white chalk.[2. Our Daily Bread, July 2016] God provides everything necessary for life and godliness (II Peter 1:3). Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.