

## CAN WE TALK ABOUT...PRIDE?

James 4:7-17

August 24, 2025

It's a slippery word, pride. In one breath it sounds like sin; in the next it speaks of survival. It can offer a wonderful sense of self-respect. *I'm proud of you.* It names movements that celebrate hard-won dignity and reclaim God-given worth in the face of human contempt. It captures the feeling of fulfillment from hard work well done. Yes, pride has its place. But scripture makes us cautious.

Proverbs warns, "Pride goes before destruction." Early Christian teachers called it the root of every other sin. Saint Augustine called it "the beginning of sin." Thomas Aquinas: "the queen of all vices." A fitting conclusion to this month's series on deadly sins. One worshiper quipped after early worship, "I'm so glad you're preaching sermons about all those bad things other people do. I just hope they're listening." Must be time to talk about pride.

Pride is the soil in which sin can grow. It bends every gift of God back toward the self. Not healthy self-respect, but the elevation of self over neighbor and God. Not gratitude for grace freely given, but the demand to control outcomes and occupy the center. This kind of pride isolates, insists on its own way, resists mercy.

James is blunt: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James is clear: to exalt yourself is to risk being humbled. James is direct: to judge your neighbor is to play God, and this is dangerous territory.

We all need this reminder. We elevate the proud. The loudest voice gets the microphone. The most shocking headline gets the attention. Influence is counted in followers, not faithfulness. Leaders are measured by airtime, not impact.

But sinful pride is not leadership. It is only noise, a clanging cymbal lacking love. True leadership displays humility, listening before speaking, serving before leading, trusting God before we trust ourselves.

Humility right-sizes our role. I grew up in the South, a region with its own vocabulary and an endless supply of pithy expressions that only make sense within its boundaries. One of my favorites? *Lord willing.* As a kid, I thought it was one word: *Lordwillin.* I would often hear seasoned saints in our church use the phrase when talking about the future: "We'll see you next Sunday, Lord willing." "We'll be planting on Tuesday, Lord willing."

At the time, it sounded rote. It sounded like a habit. Now, in that phrase, I hear faith, a quiet nod to humility. Not a quaint quip, but a concrete confession. Those saints lived in a God-breathed world. They knew that things would happen—or not—if God willed them. James says, "You do not even know what tomorrow will bring." We do not know the span of our years. That's simply true. To live *Lord willing* is to trust that tomorrow is not ours to command, but a gift of God.

My sabbatical this summer began with two long weeks in Montana. For much of that time I was outside and alone. I walked long, silent miles on trails through Glacier National Park. The mountains were massive. The skies stretched beyond what my eyes could hold. And over and over again, all summer long, the sheer scale of creation's majesty put me in my place. I remembered: I am not the center. The world will keep on turning without my control. My life, our church, this broken world rests in the mercy of the One who holds it all in grace.

And yes, Second Presbyterian Church would do just fine without me. Some of you looked almost *too* comfortable.

James wants us to remember that smallness. Pride shrinks the horizon all the way down to the size of self. Humility opens it wide to God and neighbor. Pride clings to the reins, while humility opens its hands. We remember that life comes to us...*Lord willing*. James removes us from the place of God, and then James warns us against a particular pride especially corrosive in our time: setting ourselves up as judge over others. "Do not speak evil against one another... Who are you to judge your neighbor?" Pride gives us the final word on someone else's worth, with smug superiority. We say, "At least I'm not like them." Time and again, I have found that what we call pride is often the mask our fear wears to feel powerful.

But, when pride takes power, its effects are magnified. We've seen leaders demand the spotlight, stoke the flames, treat accountability as an insult. We've seen pride packaged in a suit. Pride polished as a brand. Even the pulpit can become a pedestal, as I am occasionally reminded. The most seductive form of pride is disguised as moral outrage. It feels righteous, but it abandons love.

James warns against "speaking evil against one another." The Greek word here is *katalaleō*, literally meaning to speak down or in a downward direction, to speak down about someone, to diminish them, to make them small. And friends, we've heard this in influential voices—some who claim the name of pastor—speaking as though God has given them the authority to denounce whole communities of people, to declare our neighbors a threat simply because of who they are or where they're from.

I want to be clear. To call beloved children of God "demonic" or a "beast" is not Christian faith; it is hubris dressed as holiness. Some may hear this politically. But when scripture's call to humility is reduced to political posturing, it says more about our politics than it does about the gospel.

James asks us *all*, "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" True humility will never weaponize scripture to wound a child of God. It listens before it labels. It blesses rather than curses. It says not "*they are less*," but "*you are loved*." Words matter because they shape how we see our neighbors, regardless of who speaks them or why.

Pride condemns. Pride divides. Humility builds. Humility blesses.

We have seen it reflected among us. As I've returned from sabbatical and reengaged in our city, Jim Morris has been on my mind. Jim was one of our city's finest and most faithful leaders, a force for global good. We lost Jim a year ago. I miss him every day. It was my great privilege to be his pastor and to learn from his wisdom.

I've been reflecting on our final meal together. Neither of us knew it would be our last. For two hours, Jim told stories. Those stories were about others. He praised the leaders he loved and the institutions he served. He said, "I wish you'd known Dick Lugar and Mr. Lilly. They were such remarkable men, they could have been Presbyterians." He marveled at the opportunities he had been given, a kid from a small town in Indiana. And then we talked about basketball. We talked about education. We talked about politics. We talked about the place of faith in steering our nation toward civility. He wondered out loud how our church could do more for hungry children.

When his soup came, Jim asked if he could offer the blessing. He thanked God for all that we have, and then, as always, he shifted the focus. "God, help us remember the hurting, the hungry, the sad, the vulnerable, and the lonely. We know you love them just as much as you love us. Hard to understand sometimes. Amen."

You see, another way is possible. Pride is a clenched fist. It is full of fear, defensive, closed off and ready to fight. Humility is an open hand, ready to receive, ready to give. This change in posture reshapes our practice. So, try it in small ways. Ask for help instead of pretending you don't need it. Ask for someone else's story before you assume you know it. Share credit instead of guarding it. Confess without defense. Apologize without excuse. "I was wrong" is a complete sentence.

For leaders, humility must begin with different questions. Leaders must ask, who benefits from this decision, and who will bear its cost? Who is missing from the table? When decisions serve only our own interest, pride is

in control. Humble leadership holds power lightly and shares it widely.

And what of the Church? Well, here our call is clear: to reclaim God-given dignity wherever it is denied. As we do, we must stay sober about how quickly noble causes bend toward self-display. Even holy work can become another platform for the ego. But the remedy James offers is not shame, but surrender: draw near to God lest you drift into pride's grip.

Nearly every day here at Second, I walk past a striking print by Japanese artist Sadao Watanabe. It hangs just down this hallway. Most days, I must confess, I rush past it without even noticing. But when I pause, this is what I see: Christ kneeling, towel in hand, gently lifting the foot of his friend.

Watanabe's title for the piece is *Jesus Washes My Feet*. Not Peter's. Not the disciples'. Not theirs. Mine. Ours. The genius of the artist is that we do not stand at a distance as spectators; we ourselves are in the scene. Humility is not a vague virtue. It has flesh and bones—that of the one who emptied himself, who took the form of a servant, who was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. This is our picture of leadership.

Listen. Sinful pride does real harm. It weaponizes faith for power. It judges, excludes, and wounds. Left unchecked, it breeds bullying, belittling, and the dehumanization that crushes spirits and sometimes costs lives. Pride finds pleasure in making others small.

But humility blesses. It lifts burdens, makes space, listens with care, and serves with love.

You know this as well as I do. The world does not need more self-righteous bravado. It needs the church to show another way—a better way.

The cross puts our pride to death. As we have been served, we are called to serve. So, take up the towel. Open your hands. Serve a neighbor. Show them how beloved they are. And then remember how beloved you are, too. Amen.