

THE POWER OF HUMILITY

R. T. KENDALL



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To Greg and Christa, Logan and Alex

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xv
1. Taking Ourselves Too Seriously	1
2. Is Pride Always a Bad Thing?	11
3. The High Cost of Pride	21
4. Forfeiting Wisdom	31
5. Modesty	41
6. When the Anointing Lifts	49
7. Self-righteousness	59
8. Self-pity	71
9. Hypocrisy	81
10. Climbing Up, Climbing Down	91
11. Choosing Your Friends	99
12. How to Become Yesterday's Man	107
13. Prophetic Pride	117
14. Hypocritical Humility	127
15. Boasting	135
16. Judging and Being Judged	143
17. The Gospel	151
18. Overcoming Pride	157
<i>Conclusion</i>	167

FOREWORD

I am delighted – I can't use the word *proud* – to be asked to write the foreword to another book from the pen of my dear friend, Dr R. T. Kendall. With his usual courage and pastoral wisdom he has provided much-needed insight on a topic that is strangely and dangerously overlooked these days. Pride is a serious disease of the soul that all of us should be concerned about. Consider the following:

Pride is *deadly*. As pride takes root in our hearts, it slowly turns the focus of our lives away from God and towards self. We may sing, 'It's all about you, Jesus' but the reality is that it is now we who have become the focus of our worship. When this happens God withdraws His blessing from us. He has no option. For God to bless those who worship themselves would be for Him to reward idolatry.

Pride is *subtle*. Some sins, like some diseases, are obvious. You are unlikely to commit adultery, fall into a rage or forge a document without being aware of it. Pride, however, is very different and tiptoes unnoticed into the soul. In fact, it can enter our life accompanied by the very best of motives. So when we work hard to produce a good talk, play music well or prepare a fine meal, it is right and proper that we should be praised and accept that praise. Yet those merited compliments always bring with them the risk of pride: that we end up thinking more highly of ourselves than we should.

Pride is *universal*. No one can claim that they do not suffer from pride. Indeed, to claim you are free from pride is a sure sign that you are, in fact, proud, and an inflated self-image is a particular peril for those who are gifted and blessed by God. The higher you rise, the greater the peril of having your life fatally infected by pride.

Pride is *addictive*. Once you get to like the sound of being praised, you will seek ever more of it. Yet, like a drug, pride never delivers lasting satisfaction. You will soon find yourself resorting to ever more extreme measures to gain approval from others.

Pride is often *undetectable*. Pride can adopt an infinite number of disguises. The antidote to pride is humility. But there is false humility – well exposed by R.T. in these pages – which, while claiming to be the cure, in fact allows the disease to penetrate even deeper into the soul. Like some cunning virus, pride has a built-in mechanism to avoid detection. As R.T. points out, in one of his many discerning insights, we do not want to admit to our pride *because of our pride!*

Finally, pride *distorts* reality. Under the influence of pride, many sins can seem either attractive or necessary. So to boost our self-image we may resort to theft and adultery; to defend our reputation, we may lie and cheat. Pride withers our spiritual life. After all, when you are focused on loving yourself, it's very hard either to love your neighbour or your God. The result is spiritual fruitlessness and disaster. As the Bible wisely observes, 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall' (Proverbs 16:18).

Yet for all its seriousness, too little is said or spoken about pride today, even in the Christian world. Our culture certainly does not help. In the West we seem to have gone, within a generation, from treating pride as a sin to considering it one of life's essentials. We live in an age when it seems accepted that to succeed we must believe in ourselves, promote ourselves and assert ourselves. Our culture seems to be controlled by publicists, media consultants, public relations gurus and advisers on speech, dress and style. Pride has become legitimised: yesterday's vice has become

today's virtue. In such a climate, it is hard to resist pride. Indeed, if you try to practise genuine humility you will soon have people telling you that you are committing career suicide. When everybody else is flying high on pride, publicity and self-promotion, to adopt a policy of modesty and humility seems like taking the slow train up a hill.

Pride is a particular challenge for Christians. We have a message to proclaim and a world that needs to hear it. We are under orders from our Master not to retreat from involvement with those around us. Yet how, in a world obsessed by advertising and self-promotion, can we proclaim the good news without putting ourselves before Christ? How can we promote the message without the spotlight hurting the messenger? We need to do some hard and biblical thinking.

Given the perils of pride, it is perhaps surprising that so few people have written about it. Yet it is a dangerous and difficult topic: if nothing else, there would be a terrible irony in coming to believe that you had written a really good book about pride. The reality is that it is precisely someone like Dr R. T. Kendall, who has been at the top and who now has nothing to prove and nothing to lose, who can best talk about pride.

So I am very grateful for this profoundly stimulating, challenging and provocative book. It is stamped throughout with the heartfelt honesty, spiritual insight and biblical knowledge that have long been the valued trademarks of R. T. Kendall. R.T. defines pride as 'taking yourself too seriously'. In this book he certainly doesn't take himself seriously. But he does take God, His Word and the dangers of pride seriously – and that is exactly what we need to hear.

REVEREND CANON J. JOHN

INTRODUCTION

Writing a book on pride is ominously close to authoring a book called ‘Humility – and how I attained it’. But I must begin with a revealing anecdote.

After my publisher and I agreed on this book – a follow-up to *The Sin No One Talks About – Jealousy*, they asked me to present them with an outline before moving forward. I was not happy. ‘What?’ I retorted. ‘Are you making me jump through hoops as if I were a novice author after all the books I have done with you? Why do I have to prove myself like this?’ They explained that with the present economy being as it is, they had to adopt this procedure and they hoped I would comply. I refused.

I am ashamed to say I had not initially realised the irony of this. Here we were discussing a book on *pride*. It was my pride that might have aborted the production of this very book. I began to see how my pride was becoming more important than the book we were contemplating. I came to my senses and immediately sent in an outline for the book you are now reading. I was embarrassingly found out in the embryonic stage of this new book, a matter which my publisher quickly noticed – but was graciously prepared to overlook.

Caution: you are about to read a book by an imperfect author. If you think that I have won a big victory over pride, one which qualifies me to write this book, you could not be more wrong. And yet this disclosure of my own weakness in this area reminded me how pervasive the matter of pride is. I am admitting to ‘the sin no

one admits to, yes, but it is easier to do this when you are writing a book on it. It is not necessarily a sign of humility.

Why do we not want to admit to our pride? It is because of our pride! There are always exceptions of course, but generally speaking we are loath to reveal the *real* reason that lies behind many of our decisions. Pride is usually the true explanation why our feelings are hurt, why we hate being passed over for the wonderful invitation, why we feel rejection, why we get into trouble, why we won't admit to a mistake, why we want to be seen with certain people, why we are afraid we won't get credit for what we did, why we *stay* angry and, yes, why we are jealous. Pride is at the bottom of envy and jealousy. Pride and jealousy are first cousins within this dysfunctional family called the human race.

The purpose of my book is two-fold. First, it is to help us see more deeply into our hearts and motives. 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?' (Jeremiah 17:9). For this reason we only arrive at self-knowledge in increments – and never totally get there in this life. But seeing ourselves – embarrassing though it can be – may hopefully drive us to want to improve.

Therefore secondly, and mainly – and I pray this for every reader – it is that you will be motivated to be more like Jesus. Jesus was perfect. He was the God-man. He never sinned. He was tempted by all the things that tempt you and me, but, unlike us, He never gave in (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus did not have pride in the sense that the Bible uses that word. To put it another way: Jesus was never *proud*, that is, He was never – ever – conceited, smug or arrogant. You and I will never be completely like Jesus until we are glorified (Romans 8:30; 1 John 3:2). But we can begin now to emulate Him as much as possible.

We will see below that having pride is not always and necessarily a sin, and yet the Bible never has a single good thing to say about it. It is always listed with the worst of sins – '... sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, *pride* ...' (Mark 7:21–22 ESV). In the last days, says

Paul, ‘people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, *proud ...*’ (2 Timothy 3:2).

I write books to change lives. May God grant this to be true with the book you now hold in your hands.

I

TAKING OURSELVES TOO SERIOUSLY

“I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, . . . I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.”

I Kings 18:22; 19:14

‘There is no limit to how far a person can go, as long as he doesn’t care who gets the credit for it.’

Plaque on President Ronald Reagan’s desk

A measure of pride is essential to our self-esteem, emotional well being and good mental health. It is what gives us a sense of self-worth and dignity – which God wants each of us to have. We need to take ourselves seriously to some extent. But pride can push this too far when we begin to take ourselves too seriously. In Chapter 2 we will look at the good side of pride – its advantages to us and why it is not always bad. In this chapter however we will examine pride as it is generally understood in the Bible. As I said above, the Bible has nothing good to say about pride. Pride in Scripture is always that which is suspect and to be avoided; it is disdained. It is assumed in the Bible as arrogance, haughtiness, smugness, a feeling of superiority over others, insolence, overbearingness, superciliousness, narcissism, vainglory, conceit, egotism, vanity, self-importance.

Pride is the opposite of humility, modesty and meekness. St Augustine (d. AD 430) said that pride is ‘the love of one’s own excellence’. People like Aristotle (384–322 BC) and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) saw pride as a profound virtue. ‘I often quote myself’, said Shaw, ‘it adds spice to my conversation.’ ‘Few people think more than two or three times a year’, he said. ‘I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week.’

Most religions of the world – certainly Christianity – see pride as a sin. There are two Greek words relevant here. *Alazon* (as in James 4:16; 1 John 2:16; Romans 1:30) refers to one who makes more of himself than reality justifies, ascribing to himself either more or better things than he has, or even what he does not possess at all; he promises what he cannot deliver. The other Greek word is *hyperephanos* (as in Mark 7:22, James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5) which means arrogance. It refers to one who brags about his position, power and wealth and despises others. In 2 Timothy 3:2 both *alazon* (boastful) and *hyperephanos* (proud) are found beside each other.

Elijah

We will see throughout this book that neither word for ‘pride’ need be used explicitly to describe a person’s proud behaviour. For example, the writer of 1 Kings did not impute Elijah with pride. But that is what was going on. How dare Elijah say, ‘I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left’ (1 Kings 18:22; 19:14) – even if it were true! But it was absolutely false. Elijah had just been told that Obadiah the prophet had taken a hundred other prophets and hid them in caves (1 Kings 18:13). Elijah felt so superior to the other prophets of his day that he did not even acknowledge them as prophets of the Lord! That is sheer arrogance. Elijah is a perfect example of a person taking himself too seriously.

Could the revered and hallowed Elijah truly take himself too seriously? Yes. Is not Elijah regarded as one of the greatest men in the Old Testament? Yes. Did his prayer before all the people not

result in fire coming down from heaven and exposing the folly of the prophets of Baal? Yes. Was it not Elijah who appeared with Moses when Jesus was transfigured before the disciples on the mountain (Matthew 17:3)? Yes. And when Elijah said, ‘I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left’, God could have aborted the whole procedure because Elijah misspoke (to put it mildly). But God didn’t do that.

This encourages me. James wanted his readers to know that Elijah was ‘a man with a nature like ours’ (James 5:17 *ESV*). The point is, if God could use Elijah – and if Elijah can get his prayers answered, so too with any of us! God can use those of us who take ourselves too seriously. In the final chapter of my book *In Pursuit of His Glory* I listed five things I would hopefully do differently if I could turn the clock back after twenty-five years at Westminster Chapel. This included that I should not take myself so seriously.

I therefore define pride essentially as taking oneself too seriously. Taking oneself too seriously is the common denominator in all proud people. It describes those who resent criticism, who are insecure, who cannot laugh at themselves, whose need of praise is constant, who see themselves as overly important, who fancy themselves as being very special to God (and think God bends the rules for them), who tend to blame others for their problems, who hate taking the blame, who cannot bear not getting the credit for the good they did and who have an insatiable need to prove themselves.

Is that you? Take heart. I just described virtually every person that God has ever used.

Categories of pride

But pride takes many forms. Some try to prove they are *not* proud by trying to appear the very opposite. ‘Pride perceiving humility honourable, often borrows her cloak’, said Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790). It goes down better with people if we seem humble. The motive is the same: we are concerned how we are perceived. Our self-esteem is at stake.

There are many kinds of pride. There is social pride (keeping up with the Joneses), spiritual pride (self-righteousness), financial pride (impressing others with one's wealth), political pride (being sure to be politically correct), sexual pride (always needing to attract the opposite sex), cultural pride (impressing people with your love of the arts), pride of pedigree (placing importance on one's background), educational pride (impressing with degrees), intellectual pride (always needing to prove how much you know and how intelligent you are), pride of your good looks (overly concerned with appearance, whether regarding dress, figure or hair), national pride (sometimes being overly patriotic) or racial pride (proud of the colour of your skin). There is even theological pride, when someone feels superior because of their rightness of doctrine. Closely akin to this is prophetic pride, when someone gloats over their prophetic successes.

God hates a proud look

What must never be forgotten is that *God hates pride*. 'There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes (a proud look, *KJV*), a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers' (Proverbs 6:16–19). Note that 'haughty eyes' or 'proud look' heads the list of things God hates. 'Whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure' (Psalms 101:5). Have you ever seen anyone with a proud look or haughty eyes? I have. Certain people literally come to my mind when I think of haughty eyes and an arrogant countenance. But who am I to judge? You and I look on the outward appearance; God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). So have I too had the same outward proud expression I have seen in some when in fact people have had the exact same perception of me? I don't think I want the answer to that question.

When we consider how much God *hates* our being proud it is enough to drive us to our knees. We should ask, 'Lord, am I

like this?’ ‘You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty’ (Psalms 18:27). ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (1 Peter 5:5). ‘Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled’ (Luke 14:11). ‘You rebuke the arrogant’ (Psalms 119:21).

But when I consider that God was patient with Elijah, I feel there is hope for me. God could indeed have stepped in and interrupted the entire proceedings when Elijah openly said, ‘I am the only true prophet left’. But He didn’t. God took His time and later on called Elijah to one side, as if to say, ‘Oh by the way Elijah, I have seven thousand in Israel whose knees have not bowed down to Baal’ (see 1 Kings 19:18). God has used me over the years and then later called me to one side and gently showed me faults and flaws others saw but I had been blind to. He is such a good and gracious God.

No guilt trip

I will have failed in this book if I give you a guilt trip as you read. My task is to show our pride and God’s hatred of it – but to show we are all in this together. But more than that, that we will equally see His mercy toward those who repent of this folly. The worst thing you and I can do in this connection is to be defensive. That will never do. But if God kindly points out our failures it means we are loved (1 John 4:19) – and that there is hope for us. Repentance is a grace that God *grants* (Romans 2:4; Acts 11:48; 2 Timothy 2:25). It is a gracious gift which we do not remotely deserve. The very real possibility of being unable to be renewed to repentance (Hebrews 6:4–6) should be enough to humble all of us. But if in this book you are given to see what displeases the Lord and that you are sorry, I will give God the praise.

Even Ahab, one of the most wicked kings ever, saw his folly in a most heinous injustice he committed. But when he was reproved, he ‘tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly’. God noticed it. He said to Elijah, ‘“Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because

he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son” (1 Kings 21:27–29). This means there is hope for us all.

God rebukes us to bring us to our senses. He lets us save face. He does not chasten or discipline us to ‘get even’. God got even at the cross, when ‘the Lord . . . laid on [Jesus] the iniquity of us all’ (Isaiah 53:6). ‘For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust’ (Psalms 103:11–14). He sent the wind and the fish to swallow up Jonah, not to punish him but, as Dr Bruce Chesser put it, to save him (Jonah 1–2). How often God ‘saves us from ourselves’, as Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say.

Foolish worry: what people might think of us

Taking ourselves too seriously leads us foolishly to imagine what people might think about us. As if what they think is so important! But I will never forget a day – it was pivotal in my life – when two important men had to humble me. These two men were Dr Barrie White, my supervisor at Oxford, and Dr J. I. Packer, who functioned as a second supervisor. I had been at Oxford for about a year at the time. What I thought was to be a leisurely lunch with them was interrupted by Jim Packer saying to Barrie White, ‘Shall you tell him or shall I?’ Dr White motioned to Dr Packer to start. ‘You need to minimise your liabilities’, Jim Packer graciously said to me, showing a mastery of British understatement – and trying to let me save face. ‘I know you have come to Oxford to do your D.Phil. on John Owen’. (He was referring to the great Puritan theologian John Owen (1616–1683) whose doctrine of the priestly work of Christ had motivated me to come to Oxford, something I had told everybody back in America I would do.) Jim continued, ‘But we don’t think you are able to do John Owen’, then shared what they thought I *could* do at Oxford to get the D.Phil.

I was devastated. I went home with the worst migraine headache of my whole life. I went to bed. Why? *I worried what people would think*. It was so silly. The truth is, these people would have thought absolutely nothing about it! But I could only think of my reputation among friends back in America. Taking myself too seriously literally put me to bed. What is more: the thesis I ended up doing (on John Calvin (1509–1564)] and the English Puritans) was the best thing in that connection that ever happened to me. But at the time I was utterly governed by pride and what people would think, that friends back at my Seminary in Louisville might discover I wasn't cut out to do a doctorate on John Owen. And yet it reminds me of something my grandfather R. J. Kendall used to say: 'Don't worry over what people might be thinking of you; chances are, they are not thinking about you at all.' How true.

Building monuments to ourselves

Taking oneself too seriously is what makes people try to ensure they will be remembered by history. They have statues made, get buildings, streets or highways named after them *while they are still alive*. The notion to 'Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips' (Proverbs 27:2) seems not to appear on their radar screen. And yet it reminds me of something President Harry S. Truman (1884–1972) would say when refusing to let anybody sculpt a bust or statue of him. He said, 'I don't want people seeing my statue years later and asking, "Who was he?"'

I was disappointed when one of my heroes allowed a larger-than-life statue to be made of himself by America's greatest sculptor while he was still alive – and was even present for its unveiling! It's true! They had planned to put the statue outside in the open air. But the preacher stopped them. 'No, please put it inside. I don't want those pigeons defecating on my statue.' But here is something I think is rather funny. I decided sometime later to use this account as an illustration in a sermon, realising nobody in the congregation

at Westminster would remotely twig who I was talking about. My point in the sermon – on rewards – was that God might have to say to this great preacher at the Judgment Seat of Christ, ‘Sorry, my son, there is no reward laid up for you now, you got it all below with that statue you let them make of you.’ So far, so good. But I was shocked to learn afterwards that at least six people were present from this man’s church! By the way, he was a great man indeed. Now in heaven, if anyone deserved a statue, he did. But after he was gone.

Those in Scripture who built monuments to themselves while they were alive however were tragic figures. I have always been gripped by this. In fact there are two accounts in this connection that have deeply shaped my thinking. First, King Saul had a monument built to himself while he was still alive (1 Samuel 15:12). He had already become yesterday’s man when this happened. Second, years later Absalom stole the hearts of the people and forced his father King David to live in exile for a while. David was later restored to the kingship and will always be regarded as Israel’s greatest king. As for Absalom, ‘during his lifetime’ he took ‘a pillar and erected it in the King’s Valley as a monument to himself, for he thought, ‘I have no son to carry on the memory of my name.’ He named the pillar after himself, and it is called Absalom’s Monument to this day’ (2 Samuel 18:18).

What matters most of all

There is one thing – and one thing alone – that ultimately matters: God’s opinion of you and me. If His opinion doesn’t matter to you now, it will then. This opinion will be openly revealed at the Judgment Seat of Christ. You then will learn what God thinks of you. And you will see what He thinks of me. I can safely promise you that any accolade, humiliation, monument, criticism, put-down, compliment, praise, disappointment, lie, statue, honour or prize here on this earth will mean *nothing* then. Nothing. Except *how we handled* such things – which will largely determine what God thinks of us. Why therefore should we ever

want the praise of people here below? Why should it mean so much to us? I will come clean with you: I love compliments. A close friend (who knows me well) had a tee-shirt made for my birthday that says ‘Compliments are in order’. But the thought of pre-empting what God himself might say to me on the Day – by amassing all the awards and compliments I can get below – scares me to death. I propose to live for that Day – seeking no honour or praise but His.

The irony is, if the plaque on Ronald Reagan’s desk is correct – that *there is no limit to how far a person can go, as long as he doesn’t care who gets to the credit for it*, we will accomplish more than ever in this life if we don’t take ourselves so seriously! The way up is down. ‘... he who humbles himself will be exalted’ (Luke 14:11). ‘Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you’ (1 Peter 5:6 ESV).

John speaks of worldliness as ‘the boasting of what [man] has and does’. The KJV calls it ‘the pride of life’, the ESV footnote calls it ‘pride in possessions’ (1 John 2:16). It refers to our effort to impress people with what we have accumulated. This could refer to material things, achievements, awards, antiques, pottery, photographs with important people, prestigious jobs, degrees, clothes, furniture, art, carpet, cars, framed commendations or letters – all there to impress you! I fear there are people for whom these things matter more than anything in the world. How sad. I remember going to a home of some people in Rome many years ago. The main reason they wanted me to come to their home was to see their apartment and collection of bone china. It truly was impressive. But this was all they apparently had to bolster their self-esteem. It was as though their apartment and china gave people warrant to take them seriously. They seemed to feel I would take them truly seriously if I saw these possessions. It was all they lived for – to invite people to see their apartment and china collection.

We who are Christians sometimes forget we are going to heaven one day – and will be there a long time! Have you ever pondered the depth of these famous lines?

THE POWER OF HUMILITY

‘When we’ve been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun;
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we first begun.’

John Newton (1725–1807)

Think about this. After we have been in heaven for ten thousand years it will be like the first day. Do we really believe this? I do. Why ever do we live in this present world as though this present existence is all there is? It seems to me that the thought of going to heaven one day – to be there forever – should help us on our way not to take circumstances here below – or ourselves – so seriously.