

I am not proud. I am embarrassed. I am embarrassed for my country. I am embarrassed for our democracy. I am embarrassed by and for the candidates for the presidency. What is the cause of this tragicomedy? There are all kinds of political explanations, but I'm not interested in them today. What I am interested in is the spiritual explanation, and I think it's pretty simple.

Politics is an engine that runs on a very high-octane fuel. Some people think it's money, and money certainly has corrupted politics these days, but there's something even more sinister than money at work here. What often drives people into politics and makes them successful at it is pride. I'm not talking about national pride or team pride or gay pride or any other pride in something that is bigger than me. I'm talking about the kind of pride that is all about me. Another name for it is self-conceit.

You have to be somewhat conceited to run for office, because you have to think that you'd be better at it than anyone else. Then you pay people to keep telling you that you are better so that you won't doubt it.

Pride may be a prerequisite for politicians, but it is the foremost sin for Christians. C.S. Lewis says, "Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind." [this and all other quotes from Lewis, *Mere Christianity*] You could say that pride was the original sin, the reason Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge so they could become like gods. And hurt pride was the reason for the second sin, Cain's murder of Abel. And so the human story begins.

Listen to how Lewis describes the power of pride:

If you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, "How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronize me, or show off?" The point is that each person's pride is in competition with everyone else's pride. It is because I wanted to be the big noise at the party that I am so annoyed at someone else for being the big noise. Now what you want to get clear is

that Pride is essentially competitive...Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. 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. If every one else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud, the pleasure of being above the rest.

What does this have to do with politics? Just about everything. What pride really wants is power and politics is all about power. Lewis again, "If I am a proud man, then, as long as there is one man in the whole world more powerful, or richer, or cleverer than I, he is my rival and my enemy." Now you can see what motivates some people to run for president.

But someone might ask, what's wrong with competition? Isn't that what makes this country great? Hasn't pride been the engine of human progress ever since the world began?

Depends on what you mean by progress. I can tell you that it has certainly been the engine of human regress.

The problem with pride is not only that it makes other people my rivals and my enemies. It also makes God my enemy. Pride makes me want to compete with God. But there is no competition when it comes to God. I am in the same position as Job, when God interrogates him. I wasn't there when God laid the foundation of the earth. I didn't determine its measurements. I haven't commanded the morning, nor have I entered into the springs of the sea. I didn't give the horse its might nor is it by my wisdom that the hawk soars. [Job 38]

The fact is that I am nothing compared to God. And if I don't know that, I will never know God. If I am proud and always looking down on everything and everybody, I will never look up and see God.

I wish pride were just a problem for politicians. But all of us struggle with pride, and not just those who make a public display of it. Not surprisingly, pride is a central theme in the

Bible. The parable of the prodigal is a story about how pride came between a father and a son.

The sin of pride is there at the very start of the story. You know about the younger son who asked his father for his share of the inheritance. In the ancient world, the rules of primogeniture said that the inheritance goes to the eldest son, and that tradition of playing favorites made families a virtual petri dish for pride. There is competition between brothers from the get go. We saw it with Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and with Joseph and all his brothers. The younger son is always acting out, or someone is acting for him, to push to the front of the line, to climb to the top of the heap. Jesus knew this trope well, and so he sets up the story.

The younger son doesn't want to play second fiddle anymore, so he takes his father's money and goes off to make a name for himself. But he only manages to bring shame upon himself and his family. It was his pride that drove him away and

it is pride that keeps him away. How can he face his father now? He would rather eat with the pigs than go back to his parents.

I know some politicians who like to eat with the pigs. Don't you love it when they get caught doing something wrong and always have an aide to blame it on? And when they get caught saying something offensive, they seldom apologize for what they said. Instead, politicians like to blame the people for what they heard. "I'm sorry you took offense at what I said." Somehow, it's always someone else's fault.

Of course, politicians aren't the only ones who have trouble taking responsibility for their offenses. All of us do. We just don't get caught on national TV. Still, we have lots of excuses: It's the neighborhood I was brought up in, the school I went to, the bad parenting I received. It's my mother's fault, my ex's fault, the government's fault.

The younger son probably blames his older brother for being born first. He probably blames his father for letting him take the money and run and blames his mother for treating him like the baby of the family. But blaming others doesn't fill his belly. Hunger has a way of clearing your head.

The turning point in the story comes in verse 17, when the younger son "came to himself." I love that phrase. In our pride, it's so easy to go off and lose our self and it may take a long time for us to come to ourselves. The younger son lost his inheritance because of his arrogance. Now he has to give up the image of himself as richer than, cleverer than, and better than his brother and his father. Not until he gives up his pride, his false self, can he return to his true self.

When he has nothing to eat but his pride, he decides to repent, turn around, go home to his father and offer himself, not as a son, but as a hired servant. At least he would be well fed. But what happens is the opposite of what he thought

should happen. So thrilled is his father at his repentance that he welcomes him with open arms and kills the fatted calf for him. So when the rebel son comes to himself and humbles himself, he is received not as a servant, but a true son.

Now the younger son puts his pride on public display, but the older son is more private about his pride. Always thinking he is better than his no good bum of a brother keeps him from ever knowing the favor of his father. The older son has been with his dad all along, but in his pride, he can't feel the love that has always been there for him. In some ways, it is even harder for the son who never leaves home. If you never fall in a pit, you never learn to look up to see God.

When we spend our time—as politicians often do—thinking that we are better, smarter, stronger, and more self-sufficient than other people, we are not likely to bother to look up and see the God who is looking down and loving us no matter how wrong or stubborn or insufferable we can

sometimes be. We just have to get it in our heads that going home to God is not a weakness. Admitting that we were wrong and begging forgiveness is not a failing. Despite what the culture and the candidates teach us, being humble is not a sorry lack of self-confidence. It is a most amazing gift of grace. The only loss you incur is the loss of your false self, your proud self, and you didn't need it anyway. In losing your pride, you gain your soul.

I wonder how many marriages could have worked if we had all known that! How many friendships we could have saved! How much pain we could have prevented if we had been able to come to ourselves and go home to God! We still can. God has prepared a feast for us. All we have to do is leave our pride at the door and come to the table.