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MAJOR PROBLEMS DEALT WITH BY PAUL IN I THESSALONIANS,  
I CORINTHIANS, COLOSSIANS, AND I TIMOTHY

by M. David Johnson

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What is the worst sin? Is it murder? Is it rape? No, the worst sin is one that we as human beings seldom get upset over unless we are directly inconvenienced by it: it is the sin of arrogant pride. It is the worst sin of all because it is the decision, "My opinion is more important than anyone else's opinion, including God's." Arrogant pride is thus the foundation sin: the sin upon which all others are built.

Paul, in his writings to the churches, dealt with many different problems and with many different sins, but he always had an especially hard word to say against arrogant pride. Four notable examples of this are found in I Corinthians, Colossians, I Thessalonians, and I Timothy (All references = NIV.)

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The church at Corinth was beset by a multitude of problems. There were divisions in the church; some holding to the authority of Paul, some to the authority of Apollos, some to the authority of Peter, and some to the authority of Christ alone.

Sexual immorality was rampant, even to the point where a man was engaging in sex with his father's wife and the church had taken no action against the man.

Believers were suing each other and going to law before non-believing judges. There were problems concerning

marriage and divorce, food which had been sacrificed to idols, propriety in worship, misuse of the Lord's Supper, misuse of the spiritual gifts, and misunderstandings concerning the resurrection of the dead.

Their spiritual life was a mess. They had collected in one place all of the most awful sins we can imagine in the life of a church. They made the PTL Club and Jim and Tammy Bakker's difficulties look mild by comparison!

And yet, in the face of all these failings, Paul's only response was gentle admonition and instruction. He saved his harshest and most angry rebuke for the sin of arrogant pride; a sin we might almost completely overlook in the life of a church today. His reaction against their arrogance is found in I Corinthians 4:6-21:

"Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.' Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

"Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings - and that without us....

"I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children....

"Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?"

Throughout this letter to Corinth, Paul is speaking as a loving but firm father. He is tender in warning his children about the things that will hurt them. "You shouldn't become trapped by illicit sex and you shouldn't be so quick to fight for your rights against your brothers and sisters: such things are not good for you," he admonishes. But against arrogant pride his warning is the good old-fashioned fatherly threat, "Do you want a spanking?"

Paul knew the scriptures: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him." (Proverbs 22:15.) "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." (Proverbs 13:24.) Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death." (Proverbs 19:18.) "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death." (Proverbs 23:13-14.) It is especially instructive to note that Paul

didn't use such a threat against any of the other sins: he saved it for use against arrogant pride!

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In his letter to the Colossians, Paul again deals with several different problems: the giving up of freedom in Christ and the return to slavery to the world, rules for holy living, and rules for households. But, once again, Paul stands strongly and firmly against arrogance. In Colossians 3:5-9, Paul addresses the symptoms of arrogant pride:

"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices."

Here we can begin to understand why Paul reserved his harshest response for arrogant pride in his first letter to the Corinthians: all the other sins are actually symptoms of the underlying sin of arrogant pride. It is the arrogance that must be dealt with. It is necessary to cure the illness, not just to cover up the symptoms.

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In I Thessalonians, Paul talks about living to please God, the second coming of Christ, submission to authority, and the necessity for warning those who are idle. But again arrogance is attacked in the strongest terms. Paul prefaces his condemnation of the arrogant by reminding his readers of his love for them in I Thessalonians 2:7-8:

"But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."

But then Paul goes on to contrast that love with the arrogant hostility of those that were persecuting the church in Thessalonica. I Thessalonians 2:14-16:

"... You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last."

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Again, in I Timothy, Paul firmly stands against arrogant pride. In this epistle, Paul instructs Timothy concerning how to deal with various issues in his pastorate: false teachers of the law, propriety in worship, requirements for

overseers, the treatment of widows, elders, and slaves, and how to publicly rebuke those who sin so that others may take warning. Then, in I Timothy 6:17-19, we read:

"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."

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Watch out for arrogant pride. When it begins to raise its head, immediately flee to the cross. Look upon Jesus dying for you and ask the Holy Spirit to fill your soul with a renewal of the knowledge that it is because we are all total failures that Jesus had to die. "As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one.... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:10, 23.)

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