A man in a dark suit and tie is seen from the back, sitting at a desk and looking out a window. In the foreground, a stack of books is visible on the desk. The background is a blurred view of a city skyline.

Superbia.

The Perils of Pride.

The Power of Humility.

Superbia Discussion Guide

A 6-Week Group Study on Pride, Humility, and Cultural Discernment

By Steven J. Willing, MD

Introduction

Welcome to the discussion guide for *Superbia: The Perils of Pride. The Power of Humility*. This 6-week study is designed for small groups, book clubs, or individual reflection. Each week includes a theme, a quote from the book, a Scripture passage, and questions for discussion or journaling. You don't need to have read the entire book to benefit — but you'll want to by the end.

Week 1: The Nature of Pride

Diving into Scripture:

"Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall." Proverbs 16:18

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6

"Everyone **proud** in heart is an abomination to the Lord; Though they join forces, none will go unpunished." Proverbs 16:5

Superbia Chapter 1, excerpt

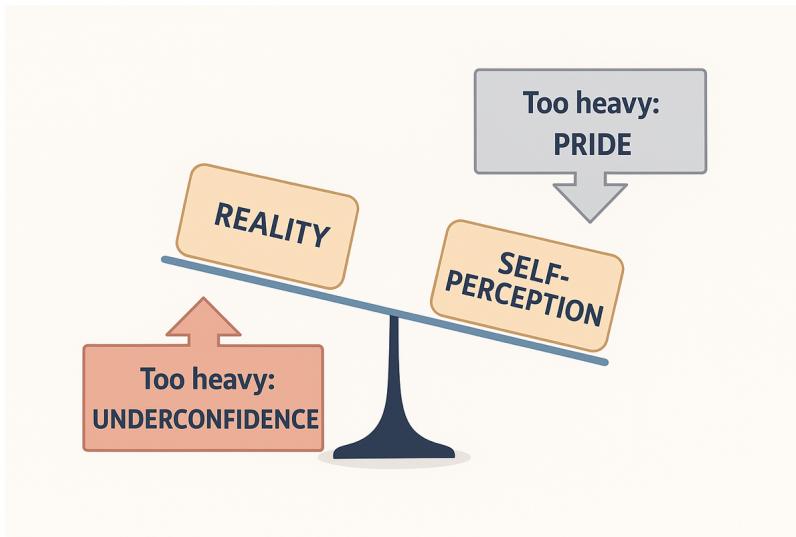
Much of this book will be dedicated to unpacking the manifestations of pride but let me begin with a simple definition: pride is thinking too highly of ourselves. As Jonathan Edwards wrote:

"The first and worst cause of error that prevails in our day is spiritual pride. This is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of Christ.... Pride is much more difficult to discern than any other corruption because, by nature, *pride is a person having too high a thought of himself*. Is it any surprise, then, that a person who has too high a thought of himself is unaware of it? He thinks the opinion he has of himself has just grounds and therefore is not too high."¹ [emphasis added]

As Edwards wryly notes, you cannot know if your opinion of yourself is too high — that situation is self-correcting. If you discovered it was too high, that alone would fix it.

To visualize the concept, imagine a scale. Our self-perception should be in general balance with who we really are. Consider traits such as intelligence, skill, expertise, virtue, or any other matter of importance. When our self-perception in any area exceeds reality, that is pride. If the scale is heavily tipped on the negative side, other factors may be in play: exaggerated or false humility, lack of confidence, or poor self-image. In practice, a perfect balance may be unattainable.

¹ Jonathan Edwards. *Thoughts on the revival of religion in New England*, Part IV Section I: Spiritual Pride. (1740) <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1/works1.ix.v.i.html> Accessed 5/22/2022



Perhaps it isn't immediately apparent to you *why* they should be in balance. We will come to that in due course. If we must err, let us err on the side of modesty.

The first casualty of pride is self-awareness, so we don't know ourselves well enough to recognize its presence.² Tim Keller likened it to carbon monoxide: it kills you without your ever knowing you're in danger.³ And how can we not *do* it if we don't know what *it* is? For the sincere disciple who seeks to grow in Christ, there is hope. Merely because we do not recognize it presently does not mean we can never recognize it. The chief aim of this book is to aid in that recognition. It will be challenging, and perhaps somewhat uncomfortable.

Pride directed *inward* is overconfidence, an unrealistically high opinion of oneself. It causes us to be overconfident of our abilities, our beliefs, our power, and our moral standing before God and each other. Pride expressed *outward* is self-exaltation. It drives us relentlessly to compare ourselves to others, to get and have more than others, to take credit for what is good, and to blame others when we fail. Ultimately, it is a passion to grasp for ourselves the place reserved for God Almighty.

Discussion questions:

1. What is Pride?

² There is a subtle but important distinction between prideful *acts* and pride as a state of mind. If we think about it, we sometimes know we acted proudly in a particular instance. It's a lot harder to know if your opinion of yourself is too high in general.

³ Twitter. "<https://Twitter.Com/Timkellernyc/Status/451690861559308288>." Accessed May 23, 2022.

2. What does God think about Pride?

3. What are the consequences of Pride?

4. Why do we often fail to recognize pride in ourselves when it's obvious in others?

Key points

- God hates pride
- Sinful pride is having too high an opinion of oneself
- Everyone is proud in some aspect of life

Week 2: Pride of Intellect

Diving into Scripture:

"We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." I Corinthians 8:1-2

"Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him." Proverbs 26:12

"Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools." Romans 1:22

Superbia, Chapter 3, excerpt:

The sum of our knowledge and opinions about life and the universe falls under "cognition." However, our beliefs do not begin and end with cognition. We form a judgment about the probability we are right: our degree of certainty. Hence, certainty is the sum of two sources: first, our confidence in the evidence, and second, our confidence in our own analysis. Those first-order beliefs would be cognition. Beliefs *about* those beliefs — like doubt or certainty — are described as *metacognition*. Both can be distorted by pride. Our problem is not merely one of wrong beliefs. The far greater problem is that we are *so sure we're right*.

False beliefs diminish our credibility, damage our life and health, and create tension in our closest relationships. But far more dangerous is the union of error with overconfidence: when we are wrong but sure that we are right, or when we are certain about something utterly impossible to prove.

Overconfidence in belief may be the most insidious and destructive manifestation of pride in both sacred and secular realms. It leads to divisiveness, schism, church splits, relational failure, political polarization, and all other forms of havoc. Unjustified certainty erects an impenetrable firewall around our own ignorance and dogmatism.

In his 2009 tome *On Being Certain*, neuroscientist Robert Burton argued that certainty is not a state of reason but of feeling, influenced by unconscious physiologic processes.⁴ There is impressive evidence for this hypothesis. Certainty is mostly illusion, Burton argues. (Though he seemed pretty *certain* about that).

A team of researchers from University College London conducted a focused investigation on individuals with intensely-held radical beliefs, attempting to tease out whether they just generally suffered from overconfidence bias or were genuinely unable to self-correct when confronted with evidence against their position (a failure of metacognition).⁵ The

⁴ Burton, Robert A. *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009.

⁵ Rollwage, Max, Raymond J. Dolan, and Stephen M. Fleming. "Metacognitive failure as a feature of those holding radical beliefs." *Current Biology* 28, no. 24 (2018): 4014-4021.

investigators challenged the subjects with a series of tests that were mundane and apolitical. Subjects coming from both political extremes showed less insight into the accuracy of their decisions and were less likely to change their decision in response to contradictory evidence. In their words, the evidence highlighted “a generic resistance to recognizing and revising incorrect beliefs” — what we could call a failure of metacognition.

Excessive certainty may be the single greatest impediment to true wisdom. As Aquinas warned 800 years ago: “A swollen mind is an obstacle to truth, for the swelling shuts out the light.”⁶ It is unnecessary for believers to abandon proper certainty concerning the faith; but we should be extremely wary that our certainty is grounded in sound doctrine conforming with existential reality and the accumulated wisdom of the historic Christian church — not ourselves, not our opinions, and certainly not our private interpretation of Scripture or our own personal “research” on the internet.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is “intellectual pride”? Is it really “a thing”?

2. Is intellectual pride harder to detect than other forms of pride? Why might that be?

3. Where do you draw the line between belief and certainty? (Or do you?)

4. Have you ever been mistaken in believing something? What is your plan to prevent it from happening again?

⁶ Gregory the Great, as quoted by Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 162:3, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3162.htm>

Key points

- It is inevitable that every one of us will be mistaken about many things
- The issue is not lack of intelligence, and smart people may be no more adept at distinguishing truth from error
- Unrecognized factors contribute to our beliefs, particularly self-interest, emotions, social influences, cognitive biases, false information, and spiritual forces
- Pride causes us to be unreasonably confident in our opinions and beliefs

Week 3: Pride of Identity

Diving into Scripture:

"Though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." Philippians 3:4-6

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." Galatians 2:20

"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Galatians 3:26-29

Superbia, Chapter 8, excerpt:

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent promised but did not deliver. In the world we inhabit, pride promises but fails to deliver. It turns out that looking out for number one leads to loneliness and disappointment.

Writing for *The Atlantic*, psychotherapist Lori Gottlieb spoke of rising numbers of young people raised in idyllic households who "just weren't happy."⁷ She was stumped. Then the pieces started falling into place. Increasingly hyper-indulgent parents were impeding their own children's development and creating narcissists. A home of nonstop affirmation, continuous protection, and constant support prevents kids from experiencing the emotional — and physical — bumps and bruises necessary for normal development. This led to anxious and entitled kids described as "handicapped royalty." Nassim Taleb formulated the concept of "anti-fragility" — the tendency to grow stronger under stress. Muscles are anti-fragile. So are people. We need to experience a healthy level of stress for normal functioning.

The role played by social media is complicated. It isn't that they cause narcissism so much as they provide a platform for kids (and adults) who are narcissistic. For kids who aren't narcissistic, media can be devastating to their self-image. As mentioned earlier, the adolescents most engaged in "digital status-seeking" are more prone to self-destructive

⁷ Gottlieb, Lori. "How to land your kid in therapy." *The Atlantic* 301, no. 1 (2011): 64-78.

behavior.⁸

People who think they are special, deserve more than others, and expect more than others suffer from “psychological entitlement.” A systematic review from 2016 evidenced the many ways this can, and does, lead to disappointment, anger, conflict, depression, and constant distress.⁹ Coauthor Julie Exline observed, “the entire mindset pits someone against other people. When people think that they should have everything they want — often for nothing — it comes at the cost of relationships with others and, ultimately, their own happiness.”¹⁰

Still jealous of the really popular kids from high school? Maybe you shouldn’t be. A 2014 study examined the outcomes of 184 teens from age 13 to age 23. Unsurprisingly, those who acted “old for their age” were deemed more popular. By age 22, the popular kids were significantly less popular than peers, perceived as less competent in relationships, and with higher rates of criminal activity and substance abuse.¹¹

In the great game of life, narcissism is a losing bet.

Discussion Questions:

1. Compare Paul’s identity before and after his conversion. What does the Bible say about identity?

2. On what should our identity be based? On what should it not be based?

3. What happens when our identity becomes more about self-expression than submission to God?

⁸ Nesi & Prinstein, 2019

⁹ Grubbs & Exline, 2016

¹⁰ Case Western Reserve University. “Entitlement may lead to chronic disappointment.” *ScienceDaily*, September 13, 2016. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/09/160913134442.htm.

¹¹ Allen, Joseph P., Megan M. Schad, Barbara Oudekerk, and Joanna Chango. “What ever happened to the “cool” kids? Long-term sequelae of early adolescent pseudomature behavior.” *Child development* 85, no. 5 (2014): 1866-1880.

4. Are there ways Christians fall into the same identity traps as the broader culture?

Key points

- The cultural/societal epidemic of narcissism is fueled by pride, and reinforces it.
- Pride craves and delights in the attention and acclamation of others
- Pride leads us to assert our significance in harmful and destructive ways
- Pride demands more credit for our achievements than we deserve

Week 4: Spiritual Pride

Diving into Scripture:

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 18:9-15

“But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’”

Matthew 23:5-7

Superbia, Chapter 6, excerpt: The Implications of Spiritual Pride

An inflated belief in our personal goodness lets us feel superior to others and justify our actions.

Self-satisfaction is an insidious thing. The young ruler's confidence relied on the basic assumption that when judgment day came, he would be judged in comparison to his peers so that, as long as he was better than most, he would make the cut. He failed to consider “privilege”: good upbringing, affluence, a comfortable life, and personal power. He may have felt morally superior to the tax-gatherer, but then he never had to worry about feeding his children. Perhaps it was easy for him to honor his father and mother. As a vulnerable young child, he probably never faced an alcoholic or abusive parent. He'd obviously made his peace with the Roman occupiers. At what cost, one might wonder?

An inflated belief in our personal goodness lets us feel worthy of heaven

Is it mere coincidence that essentially all major world religions outside of Christianity teach entrance into heaven, or its equivalent, by merit? “Salvation by works” is an oxymoron — if you could earn your way to heaven or if good works could cancel out sins, you wouldn’t need to be saved from anything. Works-based righteousness was the doctrine of the Pharisees and prevailed in the Judaism of Jesus’ day. It is true of Islam, Hinduism, and certain flavors of Buddhism. One could call it the universal heresy. Nearly every time that sects of Christians have broken loose from the mainstream, they drift back to works-based righteousness. At many points in church history, it *was* the mainstream.

It remains a popular belief. The 2016 State of Theology survey found Americans split on the issue. Considering the statement “by the good deeds that I do, I partly contribute to earning

my place in heaven,” only 35% disagreed, while a majority of 52% somewhat or strongly agreed.¹² An astonishing 76% somewhat or strongly agreed that “an individual must contribute his or her own effort for personal salvation.”

If we believe we are doing good in general, we may feel entitled to cut corners in particular.

There’s yet another peculiarity in how our minds work. Consciously or unconsciously, it turns out that behaving well, or just thinking about behaving well, makes us just a little bit more inclined to be naughty the next time temptation rolls around. [“Since I got out of bed before you, I get an extra donut.”] This is called “moral licensing.” For instance, if I am publicly crusading against climate change, it really doesn’t matter how much carbon dioxide I personally generate. (Not that anyone actually thinks that, of course). Or, if I’m the leader of a big important ministry, people should cut me some slack over how I treat women. (Again, not that anyone ever thinks that).

Active pursuit of eternal life can lead to dangerous consequences

Believing that one’s own efforts lead to eternal life can and often does cause people to lead strict, moral, and upright lives. Indeed, they may be trying much harder and appear outwardly more righteous than those who embrace salvation by grace. But the original sin nature is always there, and even the shiniest façade belies a decaying darkness within. More ominously, if one’s eternal destiny depends on individual effort, logic demands that no price is too steep — sort of a twisted version of Pascal’s wager. In the most tragic cases, this belief has led to holy wars, forced conversions, and acts of mass murder and terrorism. Thus, it is the conceit of pride —based on false theology — that ultimately drives Islamic radicals to blow up helpless innocents in the name of God, driven by a self-serving — but misguided — expectation of God’s approval and reward.

We can be led astray by heretical views that portray us as better than we are

The deeply entrenched idea that we are better than we genuinely are makes us profoundly receptive to messages affirming our virtue and profoundly indisposed toward anything to the contrary. When we so desperately want to believe we are good, we are inclined to hear those who will massage our egos and the Christ-less, cross-less, undemanding, self-adoring distortions of Christianity they peddle. We become fertile soil for the seeds of heresy, where theological liberalism and New Age codswallop germinate and flourish. The kind of religion H. Richard Niebuhr described as “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

Authentic Christianity is convicting, costly, demanding, humbling — and true.

Since I’m OK, there’s no reason to change.

If you listen to many marriage experts, you know it usually creates conflict when one spouse sets out to fix the other. It’s sound advice for each of us to focus on our own issues and not treat our spouses as a project. But some people embrace that principle much too

¹² “The State of American Theology Study 2016.” LifeWay Research, 2016. <http://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Ligonier-State-of-American-Theology-2016-Final-Report.pdf>

enthusiastically — as if the mere suggestion one *needed to be fixed* was condescending and ill-conceived. That takes it much too far. *Every one of us* is in desperate need of repair, and it's a lifelong process. If anyone thinks he does not need to be fixed, that is the *very first thing* in need of repair.

Growing in goodness is a lifelong process enabled by the Holy Spirit. Coming to Christ starts us on the journey, but conversion doesn't bring instant goodness. The process of growth is known as *sanctification*. Most Christian traditions contend that the process never ends during earthly life. No matter how far we've progressed in our Christian walk, there are things about us that need to change. Some believe that sanctification can be attained while still on earth. To me, a perfectly sanctified person is like a Martian: a single example would prove the point, but I've yet to meet one and don't expect I will.

Discussion Questions:

1. How deeply do you experience conviction of your own sinfulness?

2. What feelings do you experience when you meet or hear of people deeply entrapped in a sinful lifestyle?

3. Are you open to correction? Would your family, friends, and colleagues agree?

4. What is the danger of spiritual pride?

Key points

- Because of pride, we are inclined to believe in our own basic goodness and be content with ignoring our imperfections
- Because we believe in our own basic goodness, we erroneously conclude we can merit God's favor

Week 5: The Fruits of Humility

Diving into Scripture:

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” James 3:13-18

Superbia, Chapter 11, excerpt:

It is sometimes asserted that evil does not exist in and of itself, but always represents the deprivation of a particular good. This principle traces at least back to St. Augustine. There might be exceptions, but the rule generally seems to hold. It makes sense here. While it is true that pride is thinking “too high of oneself” (Edwards), I propose that humility is not just “the proper estimate of oneself” (Charles Spurgeon) but something deeper, richer, and more dynamic.

If humility were just the absence of pride, how could God be humble? He’s God! There can be nothing or no one more holy, perfect, or powerful. But by humbling Himself, the eternal second person of the Trinity did something vastly transcending a “proper estimate of oneself.” Relinquishing His Glory, the Holy, Omniscient, Omnipotent God took the form of a helpless infant in a powerless, poverty-stricken backwater of the Roman Empire and submitted to harassment, ridicule, mockery, torture, and the crudest of executions; while continuing to love, serve, and forgive his abusers. Genuine humility will cost you your ego, but the empyreal price was God dying upon a cross.

In His incarnation, Christ showed that humility is a foundational virtue upon which all others depend.

“Humility is the only soil in which virtue takes root; a lack of humility is the explanation of every defect and failure.”¹³ — ANDREW MURRAY

In their introduction to *Handbook of Humility* (a compilation of reviews and research), Everett Worthington and co-authors proposed three “core aspects” of humility:¹⁴

1. Accurate assessment of self

¹³ Murray. p 17

¹⁴ Worthington Jr, Everett L., Don E. Davis, and Joshua N. Hook. "Introduction: Context, overview, and guiding questions." In *Handbook of Humility*, pp. 17-32. Routledge, 2016.

2. Modest self-presentation
3. An interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-oriented

Academic study on humility has generally not focused on the spiritual elements (with a few exceptions). And the tools of social psychology are ill-suited for the study of theology. I will follow an approach similar to Worthington's while adding the spiritual dimensions:

1. Surrender to a proper understanding of self
2. Embrace the attitudes and demeanor of humility
3. Embrace a lifestyle of humility in relation to God and others

We can approach humility in these three stages. First, accept the reality of our present state by confessing our pride. Second, replace prideful attitudes with a humble approach to God, others, and self. Third, embrace humility as a lifestyle, for fully fleshed out humility leads to a changed relationship with God, others, and self.

The thrust of this book so far has emphasized the personal and civilizational destruction wrought by pride. For nearly every affliction I've mentioned so far, humility leads to the opposite result.

Personal humility contributes to better mental and physical health.¹⁵ It has been linked to higher marital satisfaction and better social relationships.¹⁶ Management experts have recognized for many years that humility is a recurring trait of the most successful corporate executives.¹⁷

Discussion Questions:

1. What is humility?

2. Suggest some key characteristics of humility. Are there some you may struggle with?

¹⁵ Toussaint, Loren L., and Jon R. Webb. "The humble mind and body: A theoretical model and review of evidence linking humility to health and well-being." In *Handbook of Humility*, pp. 178-191. Routledge, 2016.

¹⁶ Garthe, Rachel C., Chelsea A. Reid, Terri N. Sullivan, and Brianne Cork. "Humility in Romantic Relationships." In *Handbook of Humility*, pp. 221-232. Routledge, 2016.

¹⁷ Collins, James C. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap--and Others Don't*. New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 2001.

Key Points

- Humility is a positive virtue and is part of the very nature of God
- The three steps to humility consist of:
 - Embracing a proper understanding of self
 - Replacing pride with the attitudes of humility
 - Adopting a lifestyle of humility in relationship with God and our neighbors
- Humility will lead to abundant blessings

Week 6: The Power of Humility

Diving into Scripture:

"He has shown you, O man, what *is* good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8

"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *you* double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and *your* joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." James 4:6-10

Superbia, Chapter 16, excerpt:

So, having come full circle, we are back to where we started. All natural human thought, discourse, and behavior are corrupted by pride, and pride is a state of opposition to God. It is the root of most conflict. When society descends into tribalism and mutual animosity, there is pride. Where churches are divided, there is pride. When families are estranged, there is pride. Where there is vigorous embrace of falsehood, there is pride. Andrew Murray did not exaggerate: "a lack of humility is the source of every defect and failure."¹⁸

This realization leads inescapably to one necessary conclusion — if we seek peace, fruitfulness, and success, the only way there is down the hidden pathway of Humility. We've tried everything else. Why not give it a shot?

There is one remaining practice of humility that I have scarcely mentioned thus far — prayer. Properly understood, prayer is the open affirmation of our utter dependence upon God. Unfortunately, too often our prayers are more like instructions than petitions. Rather than trusting His sovereign will over civil governance, we pray for the victory of our chosen candidates from county sheriff to President of the United States, then spend the next ten minutes explaining to God what is at stake if our candidate loses. [Maybe they don't name names in your church, but we all know *who they're talking about*, don't we?] Brothers and sisters, this is not humility, and this is not faith.

When, if ever, do we pray as one for God to break our pride? How often do we pray for the indwelling Spirit to make us humble? When have we prayed for release from *our own* deception?

¹⁸ Murray, p 17

One of C. S. Lewis's most enduring and popular works is *The Screwtape Letters*.¹⁹ In this serious yet whimsical satire, a senior demon named Screwtape coaches a younger apprentice on ways to undermine the life and faith of a new adult believer. Unfortunately, many just see it as poking fun at liberal thought. There's a good deal of that. But Lewis believed — and so do I — that demonic deception is both real and prevalent.

Well, Uncle Screwtape has been busy of late, and the battle for truth over deceit is a spiritual battle against forces we cannot see, hear, or touch. The Lord's prayer many of us learned — “deliver us from evil” — is better translated as “deliver us from the evil one” (as indeed it is in the NIV and NKJV).²⁰ In the original Greek, “evil one” (πονηροῦ) is preceded by a definite article “the” (του). The expression is identical to the closing of Ephesians 6:16:

“above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.”

The biblical accounts of Jesus's engagements with the Pharisees offer a revealing and sobering account of Satanic deception. In the popular imagination, Satan tempts us to disregard the law of God, indulge in wanton pleasures, mock Scripture, and have no regard for the opinions of “religious” people. While all of those serve his purposes quite adequately, he's indifferent regarding what direction we err. After all, what sort of wayward thoughts are more likely to take root in the devout?

The Pharisees were hyper-religious, scrupulously moral, sanctimonious, and highly concerned with appearances. Far from denying the Word of God, they were famous for their rigid, hyperliteral interpretations of God's Word, strict conformity to the Mosaic law, and ostentatious displays of religiosity, with tragic indifference to the virtues of grace, love, kindness, and humility. Jesus called them the children of Satan. There is no shortage of such persons in Christian history or in the Christian present. Satan's chief objective is not to sow false doctrine, but hatred, division, and conflict. He doesn't care what we believe, so long as we are at each other's throats. We make it too easy for him.

In your church, public, and group prayers, how often have people prayed for deliverance from Satan — meaning, above all, deliverance not from illness and troubles but from *deception*? In my experience, hardly ever. Maybe we should be praying the way Jesus taught us?

Nurturing pride in our hearts is like bolting down all the windows and doors but leaving the garage door wide open. It's like a security vulnerability in the operating system through which a hacker can gain complete control of a server. Satan zeroes in on our pride. It worked on Adam and Eve, and it's been working ever since. You think you're immune? Then he has you *exactly* where he wants you. But Edwards knew where true power lay:

¹⁹ Lewis, C. S. *The Screwtape Letters: Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil*. C. S. Lewis Signature Classics Edition. London: HarperCollins, 2016.

²⁰ Matthew 6:13, Luke 11:4

“Nothing sets a person so much out of the devil’s reach as humility.”²¹

Discussion Questions:

1. Explain the power of humility.

2. What results from a lack of humility?

3. What’s one concrete step you could take this week to grow in humility?

Key points

- Worldly power is fleeting; God remains in absolute sovereign control of world affairs
- God shows His power through the weak and lowly
- Humility is active, not passive
- There is no justification for Christian pessimism: Jesus will triumph over all.

²¹ Edwards, Jonathan. *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England*. 1740
<https://ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1/works1.ix.v.i.html> Accessed 2/14/2022

Final Reflection

As you conclude this journey through *Superbia*, take time to reflect on what you've learned. Which ideas challenged you? What personal or cultural habits have you begun to notice? How might you cultivate deeper humility in your life, relationships, and witness?

Next Steps

If you enjoyed this study, consider:

- Sharing the guide with your church or group
- Subscribing to my newsletter on Substack at swilling.substack.com
- Exploring more resources at swilling.com
- Leaving a review for *Superbia* online

Your feedback, questions, and insights are always welcome.

Want to Go Deeper?

This 6-week study guide draws from selected chapters of *Superbia: The Perils of Pride. The Power of Humility.*

The full book covers a broader and deeper range of topics, including:

- Chapter 3 – “I think, therefore it must be true.” – Overconfidence of Belief
- Chapter 5 – “God helps those who help themselves...right?” – Overconfidence of Control
- Chapter 8 – The Importance of Being Important: Overestimation of Personal Significance
- Chapter 9 – The Wrath of Cain: Conflict, Competitiveness, and Envy
- Chapter 10 – Pride Begets Prejudice: Tribalism, Racism, and Devaluation of Others
- Chapter 11 – “I’m OK – You’re Not!” – Pride and Judgmentalism
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About the author:

Dr. Steven Willing is board-certified in diagnostic radiology and neuroradiology, with an MD from the Medical College of Georgia and an MBA from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He has held faculty positions at the University of Louisville, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and Indiana University, where he taught and practiced diagnostic and interventional neuroradiology.

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