

The Pride Cycle

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It has been said that a good talk will always comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. As you listen this morning, you might consider which of those two applies to you. If my message accomplishes either of these two results, I will feel it has been worthwhile. I have prayed that the Holy Ghost will carry my words to your hearts and that you will then apply them in a way that will bless your lives.

There is a prevalent pattern of behavior in the Book of Mormon commonly referred to as “the pride cycle.” It is repeated so frequently that one begins to sense that the Lord and His prophets are trying to teach us something important—that perhaps its inclusion in the record is meant to be a warning from the Lord to each of us in our day.

Pride is a serious sin. In fact, in the book of Proverbs we read that it is number one on the list of seven deadly sins that the Lord hates.¹ Using a clock as a metaphor, let’s say that the pride cycle begins at twelve o’clock—the pinnacle of pride. When we are at twelve o’clock on the pride cycle, we, like the Nephites of old, feel so successful, so intelligent, and so popular that we begin to feel invincible. We enjoy it when others compliment us on our successes, and we are irritated when others around us receive compliments on their successes. At twelve o’clock we tend not to listen to the counsel of others. We don’t need others. Sadly, we

often conclude that we don’t even need God or His servants. We bristle at their counsel. We are doing just fine on our own. We forget or we reject what King Benjamin taught: that we “are eternally indebted to [our] heavenly Father, to render to him all that [we] have and are.”²

Our modern-day prophets have warned us against unrighteous pride. President Ezra Taft Benson called it “the universal sin” and “the great stumbling block to Zion.”³ President Dieter F. Uchtdorf compared pride to “a personal Rameumptom, a holy stand that justifies envy, greed, and vanity.”⁴ However you define pride, its consequences are always the same. It alienates us from God. It pushes us around the pride cycle to two o’clock, where we offend the Spirit of the Holy Ghost.

Initially we may think that offending the Spirit of the Holy Ghost is inconsequential. Nephi described it as being “lull[ed] . . . away into carnal security. . . . All is well in Zion [we think]; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well.”⁵ Interestingly, at two o’clock on the pride cycle, if we are honest with ourselves, we really are not that happy. We have

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this gnawing sense that we are slipping. We try to fight back against the uncomfortable currents of the pride cycle. We cling to the memories of past successes and insist on putting our trust in the arm of flesh. This is a serious mistake.

Jesus taught that you and I are like branches that depend on the vine for nourishment. “I am the vine,” He taught, “ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.”⁶ When we offend the Spirit, we cut ourselves off from the very source of all spiritual nourishment, and it is just a matter of time until we begin to wilt. Without the help of the Lord and the influence of the Spirit, the gravitational pull of the pride cycle drags us down toward four o’clock failure.

The Lord taught Joseph Smith:

*For although a man may . . . have power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall.*⁷

We can choose our conduct, but we cannot choose the consequences of our conduct. At four o’clock on the pride cycle, we experience the painful consequences of our foolish pride. We may lose the job. We may lose the girlfriend or the boyfriend. We may lose the respect of those who matter most to us. Worse yet, we may lose respect for ourselves. Time has a way of relegating the most important among us from the list of Who’s Who to the list of Who’s He? or Who’s She? And at four o’clock we come face to face with our own inadequacies. Like Moses, we realize that we are not so important after all, “which thing [we] never had supposed.”⁸

The great English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a thought-provoking poem entitled “Ozymandias,” in which he told of “a traveler from an antique land” who happened upon the ancient remains of a once-imposing stone statue. All that remained of the statue were two “trunkless legs,” a shattered, half-buried head, and a pedestal with an inscription that read:

*“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*⁹

Failures and afflictions are not happy thoughts for any of us, but, ironically, we often find that they are great blessings because they tend to push us on around the pride cycle toward six o’clock humility. Our journey from four o’clock failure to six o’clock humility can be strangely exhilarating. We begin to lose our pretensions. We are no longer trying to impress those around us. We begin to see things more clearly and more honestly. We are more comfortable with criticism and can smile at our own mistakes and weaknesses.

At six o’clock on the pride cycle, it is not, as one Christian author has observed, that we think less of ourselves but rather that we think of ourselves less.¹⁰ The British writer G. K. Chesterton described the transition brilliantly when he wrote:

*How much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it. . . . You would break out of this tiny and tawdry theatre in which your own little plot is always being played, and you would find yourself under a freer sky, in a street full of splendid strangers.*¹¹

At six o’clock on the pride cycle, we become truly humble. We also become meek. Humility and meekness are foundational principles of the gospel. We speak often of the great triumvirate of Christian virtues: faith, hope, and charity. But the prophet Mormon suggested that there is a fourth virtue that makes possible the other three. He taught:

And again, behold I say unto you that he cannot have faith and hope, save he shall be meek, and lowly of heart.

*If so, his faith and hope is vain, for none is acceptable before God, save the meek and lowly in heart; and if a man be meek and lowly in heart, and confesses by the power of the Holy Ghost that Jesus is the Christ, he must needs have charity.*¹²

Another scriptural attribute often associated with six o'clock humility is submissiveness. King Benjamin taught that the natural man is an enemy to God and will be forever and ever unless he becomes as a little "child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father."¹³

We can learn much about humility and meekness from little children. They seem to spend much of their little lives at six o'clock on the cycle. They are comfortable there. No wonder the Lord teaches us that in order to come into His presence, we must become as little children.

One of our sons and his wife were struggling with contention and disunity among their children in their home. After counseling together, they decided that pride was the cause. They held a family council on the matter with their children and determined together that humility is what the children needed to eliminate the contention and disunity. To help their children remember to be kind, my son and daughter-in-law placed a chair in the corner of the kitchen and designated it as "the humility chair." When a child misbehaved or became upset, they would invite him to sit in the humility chair for a while until he could reflect and recalibrate. Then he could rejoin society whenever he was ready.

The humility chair worked as they had hoped it would. One day after our son had returned from a long, hard day at work and had displayed some impatience with several of the children, who were yelling and running through the house, one of his little daughters looked at him and said, "Papa, you need to sit in the humility chair"—which he did. He reflected, recalibrated, and rejoined society when he was ready.

Each of us would be wise to designate a humility chair—if not in the corner of the kitchen, perhaps in the corner of our minds and hearts—where we can recalibrate and remember our dependence on the Lord. Partaking of the sacrament each week provides just such an opportunity.

We should not make the mistake, however, of confusing meekness with weakness. It has been said that meekness is not a recognition of our weakness but rather a recognition of the *true* source of our strength. There is nothing weak about meek. It is just that when we are humble and meek, we don't elevate ourselves; we elevate God.

David, the young shepherd boy, was sent by his father to deliver food to his older brothers who were fighting the Philistines in the Valley of Elah. When David got to the Israelite camp and learned of the challenge from the giant Goliath, he offered to represent the armies of Israel and fight the giant himself. While his brothers ridiculed him, David meekly explained to King Saul that "the Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine."

Something in David's meek demeanor must have impressed King Saul, because he responded, "Go, and the Lord be with thee."¹⁴

So David confronted the giant, who was furious that the Israelites would send a shepherd boy to fight him. He called out to David:

Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field.

Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied.

*This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand.*¹⁵

Then, with a sling and one small stone, the meek shepherd boy, David, killed the proud giant Goliath.

You and I live in a society in which humility and meekness seem almost counterintuitive. Trash talk, power politics, and end-zone victory dances are celebrated while noiseless devotion to God is increasingly ignored and even at times belittled. But let us never forget, brothers and sisters, that humility and meekness are required if we wish to continue our progress around the cycle.

At six o'clock on the pride cycle, when we are truly humble and meek, we turn back to God because there is often nowhere else to turn. Our hearts are now broken and our spirits are contrite. The world defines "broken hearted" as being overcome by grief or despair—something to be avoided if at all possible. But in the scriptures, having a broken heart is a peaceful and hopeful condition and ultimately a prerequisite to eternal glory.

Consider this perspective on what it means to have a broken heart. To break a horse is to train a horse how to be ridden. A broken horse accepts the saddle strapped to its back, the reins placed around its head with the bit in its mouth, and a rider in the saddle. A broken horse has learned through experience how to obey and be responsive to the guidance given by the rider. Only then can a horse be useful and productive. And so it is with a broken heart; a broken heart is one that has been trained through experience to be obedient and responsive to the commands of the Master. Only with a broken heart can we be truly useful and productive in the Lord's service.

At six o'clock we yield our broken hearts to God, and because we are humble, the Lord begins to "lead [us] by the hand, and give [us] answer to [our] prayers."¹⁶ With His guidance, we continue around the pride cycle toward eight o'clock, when we invite the Spirit of the Holy Ghost into our lives once again.

The Spirit's influence changes our hearts. Like the people of King Mosiah, "we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually."¹⁷ We begin to keep God's commandments, and He begins to pour down His blessings upon us—blessings that He has always desired to give us, for that is His nature, but that we refused to receive because of our foolish pride. We begin to receive blessings because we are now obeying the laws upon which they are predicated. We pay our tithing, and the Lord opens the windows of heaven and pours down so many blessings that we cannot receive them all.

Our humble obedience to the commandments powers our progress around the pride cycle

toward ten o'clock, when we find ourselves in a state of blessed happiness. We experience success. It should not surprise us; it is a scriptural promise:

*And moreover, I would desire that ye should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual.*¹⁸

Ten o'clock on the pride cycle is a pleasant and wonderful place to be, but unfortunately it is also a very dangerous place to be. Our associates begin to pat us on the back and to compliment us for all our successes. Unfortunately, we begin to believe them. When I was called to serve as a General Authority, President Uchtdorf reminded me of some timely advice he had received at the time of his call.

"Brother Andersen," I was told, "as a General Authority, people will be very kind to you. They will compliment you on your service and tell you how much they like your conference talks. But when they do, just don't inhale."

Compliments can be like a drug. If we are not careful, they can cloud our judgment and create in us an ungodly desire for more and more praise and credit. And if our friends don't give us the credit we so richly deserve, we risk rotator cuff injury from trying to pat ourselves on the back. Like our ancient adversary, we whisper to ourselves that *we* deserve the credit, for surely we have done it.

And thus we can behold how false, and also the unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men; yea, we can see that the Lord in his great infinite goodness doth bless and prosper those who put their trust in him.

*Yea, and we may see at the very time when he doth prosper his people, yea, in the increase of their fields, their flocks and their herds, and in gold, and in silver, and in all manner of precious things of every kind and art; . . . yea, and in fine, doing all things for the welfare and happiness of his people; yea, then is the time that they do harden their hearts, and do forget the Lord their God, and do trample under their feet the Holy One—yea, and this because of their ease, and their exceedingly great prosperity.*¹⁹

Slowly—and without fully realizing it—we once again approach the twelve o'clock pinnacle of pride, so busy looking around for accolades that we fail to look ahead at the precipitous fall that awaits us. For “pride [always] goeth . . . before a fall.”²⁰ And so the incessant cycle continues.

Brothers and sisters, let's be honest. Most of us, like the Nephites of old, have ourselves taken a few laps around the pride cycle. I used to wonder how the Nephite nation could run the entire cycle in a period of as short as five years. I have since come to believe that we can run the cycle in five years and we can run it in five minutes. It is a pernicious pattern of thinking and behavior that permeates our society. It is so common that it sometimes becomes hard to recognize.

Are we consigned to continue forever in this endless do-loop of despair? Is there no way to get off the pride cycle? There is. In fact, there are two points on the pride cycle where we can exit—one to our eternal destruction and the other to our everlasting happiness.

At four o'clock, when we are facing failure or affliction and feel like all is lost, if instead of becoming humble we become angry; if we lose hope or give in to self-pity; or if we begin to blame others—including God—for our misfortune, then we will exit the pride cycle. But we will exit downward to destruction, as did the Nephites of old.

But at ten o'clock, when it seems like we can do no wrong, when all is going well, if instead of becoming proud we become thankful, then we will exit the pride cycle. But this time we will exit upward toward God. To exit the pride cycle at ten o'clock, we must recognize that every blessing we receive comes from Heavenly Father. He is the source of all that is good in our lives—the fount of every blessing. We must embrace King Benjamin's teaching that we “all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind.”²¹

A successful ten-o'clock escape from the powerful pull of the pride cycle is not easy, but

it is possible. We have a few examples in the Nephite record to prove it. Consider this one from Alma 62:

But notwithstanding their riches, or their strength, or their prosperity, they were not lifted up in the pride of their eyes; neither were they slow to remember the Lord their God; but they did humble themselves exceedingly before him.

Yea, they did remember how great things the Lord had done for them, that he had delivered them from death, and from bonds, and from prisons, and from all manner of afflictions, and he had delivered them out of the hands of their enemies.

*And they did pray unto the Lord their God continually, insomuch that the Lord did bless them, according to his word, so that they did wax strong and prosper in the land.*²²

As we speak, each of us likely finds himself or herself somewhere on the pride cycle. Where are you? If you are at four o'clock, if it feels like all is lost and you are a total failure, don't despair. You are in a good place. Avoid blaming others for your failure. Humbly turn to God and recognize your dependency on Him.

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

*In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*²³

The gravitational pull of the pride cycle will draw you on around to a brighter future.

But if you are at ten o'clock, basking in the false light of success, be careful. Avoid the tendency to turn inward and become prideful. “Count your many blessings; name them one by one.”²⁴ Follow the scriptural counsel to remember all that the Lord has done for you. As the sacramental prayer reminds us, we must remember Him not for an hour or two but always.²⁵ We must not take Him or His sacrifice for granted. We must not fail to thank Him for each and every blessing.

The story is told of an elderly grandmother who was walking along the seashore with her

little grandson when a giant wave swept in, picked up her grandson, and carried him out to sea.

The grandmother looked up to heaven and cried, “Lord, how could you do this to me? I pay my tithing, I fast once each month, and I live the Word of Wisdom.”

Before the grandmother could say amen, another giant wave swept in and delivered her grandson at her feet. She looked down at the boy, then up to heaven, and said, “Wait! He had a hat.”

Recognize that all good things come from God. He is the source of every blessing you receive. Fill your heart with gratitude for His merciful kindness. Treasure and follow the counsel of His servants. Your gratitude will inoculate you against pride and make a way for your escape from the pride cycle.

Brothers and sisters, you are important to the kingdom of God. You are the hope of Israel, Zion’s army, the children of the promised day. Please be wise. May we each heed the prophetic warning of the Nephite pride cycle.²⁶ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Proverbs 6:16–17.
2. Mosiah 2:34.
3. Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989.

4. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Pride and the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, November 2010.
5. 2 Nephi 28:21.
6. John 15:5.
7. D&C 3:4.
8. Moses 1:10.
9. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias” (1817).
10. See Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002), 148; see also C. S. Lewis, “The Great Sin,” book 3, chapter 8, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 114.
11. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 34–35.
12. Moroni 7:43–44.
13. Mosiah 3:19.
14. 1 Samuel 17:37.
15. 1 Samuel 17:44–46.
16. D&C 112:10.
17. Mosiah 5:2.
18. Mosiah 2:41.
19. Helaman 12:1–2.
20. Proverbs 16:18.
21. Mosiah 4:19.
22. Alma 62:49–51; see also Alma 1:29–31.
23. Proverbs 3:5–6.
24. “Count Your Blessings,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 241.
25. See D&C 20:77, 79.
26. See Alma 4:2 (failure), 3 (humility), 4 (invite Holy Ghost), 5 (success), 6 (pride), 9 (offend Holy Ghost), 11 (failure).