

Isaiah 65:5 & 66:2

Isaiah 65:5 “ . . . those who say, ‘Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!’ These are smoke in My nostrils, a fire that burns all the day.”

Isaiah 66:2 “But to this one I will look with favor, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.”

In these two passages, God describes His responses to two very different human heart-attitudes. He is repulsed by those who have a “holier than thou” attitude toward others, but He looks with favor on those who humbly receive His instruction.

It is not that God rejects us if we have ever had a self-righteous attitude. Nor is it that God owes us His blessing if we have ever heeded His Word. We are all sinners who deserve God’s judgment, and we are accepted by Him only through our faith in the gracious gift of His Son. Think rather of these two attitudes as our hearts’ most basic responses to God.

The former is a prideful attitude. Pride manifests itself most commonly not in blasphemous raging against God, but in our self-righteous judgments against other people. Our sinful hearts exalt themselves more often by criticizing others’ faults than by rank boasting. When I look back on my inner thought-life for the day, it is sobering to realize how many of my thoughts were essentially: “Do not come near to me, for I am holier than you.” Almost anything can serve as fodder for my self-righteous judgment: political opinions, personality



eccentricities, mispronounced words, physical imperfections, minor interruptions – it all provides fuel for the fire that creates smoke in God’s nostrils.

God is implacably opposed to pride because it is the one thing that keeps us from drawing near to Him. Pride stiff-arms God by saying (whether we realize it or not): “I don’t need Your mercy because I am better than other people.” Any honest person realizes how much this attitude infects him – but the most insidious thing about pride is that the more it dominates our hearts, the less we realize its presence and harmful effects.

Maybe this is why Jesus was so strong in His exposure and denunciation of self-righteous pride. He saved His severest rebukes for the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 6 & 23). He told parables that rebuked their “holier than thou” attitude toward common Jewish sinners (Luke 15). He exposed the Pharisees’ “Thank You that I am not like other people” prayers as boasts that prevented God from accepting them (Lk. 18:9-14). Some people think Jesus spoke this way because He was disgusted with them, but I believe He spoke in love to try to wake them up from their self-righteous slumber. He has certainly needed to speak this way to me to wake me up from the blindness of my pride!

On the other hand, God *always* looks with favor on a humble heart, because a humble heart grants Him access. As James says, “God is opposed to the proud, but He gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). When God finds a humble heart, He *always* exalts it. As Peter says, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:6). To the tax-collector who prayed, “God be merciful to me, the sinner,” Jesus promised that he went home justified – granted right standing with God.

Our greatest need is a humble heart. If we have it, we have God’s favor, and that is all that anyone could ever have. We cannot self-generate humility any more than we can self-eradicate pride. But we can agree with God that we want Him to break our pride and work humility



into our hearts. And we can cooperate with Him as He describes what humility looks like. Isaiah 66:2 says that he who is humble is “contrite in spirit and trembles at My word.”

A contrite spirit is a heart that receives God’s correction without excuses, rationalizations or blame-shifting. Pride criticizes others to avoid God’s correction; humility receives God’s correction and casts itself on God’s mercy alone. A contrite heart will never be disappointed. The pain of being wrong will be swallowed up by the joy of God’s mercy. A contrite heart is secure because it is loved by God for Christ’s sake, rather than because it is “holier than others.”

A humble heart “trembles at My word.” This is not the trembling of servile fear of punishment; it is the trembling of a heart that thrills to listen to the One who is so gracious. To tremble at God’s word is to fear Him in the biblical sense: “If You, O Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared” (Psalm 130:3,4). A humble soul rejoices in God’s forgiveness, and regards His instruction as another precious gift of His love.

If you are a child of God, there will be a war in your soul today between these two attitudes. You cannot prevent this internal conflict, but you can say to God: “I want humility to win today,” and you can ask for God’s help to choose for humility in the concrete situations that emerge. Do this only, and God will give you grace and exalt you!

Thank You, Lord Jesus, that You exposed my pride through Your perfect humility. Thank You that You humbled Yourself to death on a cross to pay the just penalty of my pride. Help me today to turn away from a “holier-than-thou” attitude, and teach me how to have a contrite heart and tremble at Your word.

