

Seven Deadly Sins: Pride

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 18: 9-14

Friends, I'll begin my sermon this morning in a bit of an unusual way – with a warning. Let me warn you right up front here that the parable we just read is a trap. Now, I'm not saying, that Jesus is in any way a trickster. But I am saying that this parable sets a trap for us. Here's what I mean. At face value the moral of the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector seems to be: it's wrong to think highly of yourself, like the hypocritical Pharisee. Instead, we should be humble like the self-abasing tax collector. There you go. What a good and important lesson for us to learn. But you see that's exactly where the trap springs. Because the minute you decide to take this parable to heart and be more humble - and not like the Pharisee over there - in fact, thank God I'm not like him - the trap has sprung. You've become the Pharisee. You've been caught by pride. And pride is such a subtle but persistent pursuer that none of us can fully avoid its sinister traps.

If you've been worshipping with us, you know that for Lent we've been looking at the seven deadly sins. And we've affirmed in our series that these sins are all misdirected loves. These sins take something good, something given to us by God and they twist them to become something destructive, something that robs joy from our lives. This morning we're obviously thinking about pride. And pride is unique in the list of sins because sometimes it's on the list of the seven deadlies but other times it's not because it's considered to be the root of all the other sins. If the seven deadly sins are the branches of a tree, pride is part of the trunk and root system that feeds and supports the rest of the tree.

So what is pride? Well, I think it's helpful to first identify what pride isn't. Pride isn't self-respect. Self-respect is something we need and should have as people created in the image of God. It is ok and even important to respect and value who God made you to be. Pride should not be confused with self-esteem. Self-esteem involves an honest assessment of your strengths, your gifts, your character and your achievements. Pride should also not be confused with self-love. Jesus commanded us to love others as we love ourselves." As Frederick Buechner notes, Christ's command can legitimately be reversed to say "love yourself as you love others." Buechner adds that self-love "does not mean your pulse should quicken every time you look into a mirror any more than it's supposed to quicken every time your neighbor passes the window." Finally, pride should not be mixed up with feeling proud. You can feel proud of something or someone without being proud. "A researcher who discovers a new important cancer therapy can be elated and awash with a feeling of pride over her achievement without being "puffed up" by it. A father whose son joins a prestigious law firm may properly feel proud of his son's hard work and dedication.

So, what is pride? Well, in considering a multitude of definitions here's my boiled down summary; I'm quite proud of it (just kidding about that): Pride, overestimates, inflates, and is preoccupied with one's own abilities or qualities thus harming communion with others and with God. C.S. Lewis says that pride "has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began. Other vices may sometimes bring people together: you may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken people or unchaste people. But pride always means enmity.... and not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God." "In God," says Lewis, "you come up against something that is in every respect immeasurably

superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that - and therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison - you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man, says Lewis (or woman, I'll add) is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." C.S. Lewis highlights an important point. At the heart of pride is my refusal to look up and to acknowledge God as God. At the heart of pride is my desire to be the one on the throne. At pride's center is my longing to control how things should go, to be the one with my hands on the wheel as I negotiate this chaotic and unpredictable world.

For you and I know, all too well that life can turn on a dime, that life holds an awful lot of jagged edges that we can't control. So maybe it's no wonder that in order to survive, in order to navigate the uncertainties of life - we make ourselves look and feel bigger and better and stronger. We puff ourselves up so as to convince ourselves and others that we can manage, that we've got this, that we are worthy. You know, it reminds me of the Pharisee, who remember according to religious standards, appears very together and very worthy. He actually IS exemplary and keeps the law meticulously. He doesn't steal or cheat. He gives generously. He cares well for his family. He faithfully goes to church, support's the ministries of the church, even serves on council. He is a good man. But what does Jesus tell us about this very good and worthy man? Well, Jesus says not only that he's in rotten shape but that he's in worse shape than the tax collector who is a truly bad man, like mafia bad. Who terrorizes taxes out of his neighbors and after paying a flat fee on them to Rome, lines his own pockets and lifestyle with whatever else he can ruthlessly squeeze out of them. But who shockingly is the one Jesus says went home justified from the temple that day. He went home right with God. How could that be so? Well, because the tax collector understood the gospel. He somehow saw himself in proper perspective to God, as a sinner saved only by grace. He knew he had nothing to offer. Nothing to bring to the table but empty hands. Which is true for us all but is the hardest thing in all the world for us to accept.

What Jesus parable wants to do is wrestle our attention away from ourselves whether we're pious or pitiful and direct it to the God who delights in saving sinners and in welcoming those we may least expect into his unimaginable grace, mercy, and joy. It's said that true humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less - and God more. So how do you and I keep fighting against pride's subtle persistence? I'll name just two ways this morning. First, by nurturing humility in our relationships with other people. The Apostle Paul said, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves." There's a great story about President Lincoln, who once got caught up in a situation where he wanted to please a politician, so he issued a command to transfer certain regiments. When the secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, received the order, he refused to carry it out. He said that the President was a fool. Lincoln was told what Stanton had said, and he replied, "If Stanton said I'm a fool, then I must be, for he is nearly always right. I'll see for myself." As the two men talked, the President quickly realized that his decision was a serious mistake, and without hesitation he withdrew it. Imagine if pride had gotten its way. When we don't take ourselves too seriously and are gracious with those around us, especially those with whom we disagree, humility and community flourish and joy abounds. Booker T. Washington, the renowned black educator, was a great example of this truth. Shortly after he took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he was walking in an exclusive section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her. Because he had no pressing business at the

moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. Someone else in the house recognized him that day. The next morning the embarrassed woman went to see Mr. Washington in his office at the Institute and apologized profusely. "It's perfectly all right, Madam," he replied. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend." She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute. Again, imagine if pride had gotten its way.

Secondly, we nurture humility as we recall that God is God and that God alone is the fount of every blessing. God is our beginning and end. Only in God do we live and breathe and have our being - so all that we are and all that we have - come from and belong to God. Rebecca Konyndyke DeYoung, in her book *Glittering Vices*, calls attention to Johann Sebastian Bach, who is remembered not only for writing beautiful cantatas and organ music but also for writing on every manuscript, "solo deo Gloria." To God alone be Glory! "Using our gifts well", she writes, "appreciating genuine goodness wherever one finds it, and recognizing beauty and magnificence, whether large or small - ...are all ultimately meant to point us back to God." She says that when she looks back on the birth of her children, the greatest blessing she and her husband have been given, she believes their delivery room reaction was right on target. In the moments after birth, she writes, we were simply awash in waves of profoundest gratitude and overwhelmed by the wonder of the tiny bundle that lay in our arms. For that moment, at least, we breathed our glorias in hushed tones.

Friends, today we remember that the people in Jerusalem were also breathing out their glorias, as Jesus, not with pride atop a war-horse, but humble and on a donkey, rode into Jerusalem. With humility he will suffer, be nailed to a shameful cross, and give up his life for us. But, thanks be to God, on the third day he will walk out of the tomb the King of kings and Lord of lords. Blessed is he who humbly comes to us - in the name of the Lord. Solo Deo Gloria! Amen.

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