



As we prepare to journey through Lent I will offer a series of messages on the Seven Deadly Sins. Lent lends itself to the more introspective of sermon topics, and the Seven Deadly Sins certainly fall into that category. We need to be more contemplative, which is difficult in this loud and busy world. There's not much contemplation going on in our society today, certainly, on Super Bowl Sunday.

The Seven Deadly Sins are comprised of the following – pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. Until now I have never preached on this list of sins, and if memory serves me correctly, I have only preached on two of these sins in all my years of ministry – pride and anger, with some mentions of greed here and there.

The Seven Deadly Sins are not quite found in a Biblical List. I say *not quite* because the Book of Proverbs comes close. In Proverbs 6:16-19 we read that *there are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.*

The most well known Biblical reference to pride, the sin we will study this week, is probably that of Proverbs 16:18 – *pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.* This characteristic of pride is evident in many parts of Scripture, beginning in the story of the fall in the Garden of Eden, where the serpent plays upon the pride of the man and woman (Genesis 3:1-7). It continues in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) and the pride of humanity in reaching toward the heavens, and is also found in many of the stories that reference the scribes and Pharisees, whose sense of pride caused them to look upon others with disdain. This is most notably found in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple (Luke 18:9-14), which is our text for the day –

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

1. The Sin of Pride Is A Distortion of Love.

From the time we are young we are inculcated with the message of pride – *take pride in your efforts, take pride in your appearance, be proud of yourself, and we are proud of you*. Some people have heard the frustrated question *can't you take more pride in yourself?*

As we hear so much about the ways in which we should be proud, what then, is wrong with pride? Nothing, in some ways. There is a healthy form of pride, which is appreciating the talents and accomplishments of others.

Perhaps pride is the wrong word to use in those circumstances; it would be more accurate to use the word love. There is nothing wrong in taking pleasure in something that is good, and an achievement of a family member or friend is something that is good. It is love we are really expressing when we talk about the pride we have in our children, and when we urge them to have pride in the things they do, because that is a form of a health self-love. In this sense, the words pride and love become interchangeable, and in a Biblical sense the two are woven together at the baptism of Jesus, when God pronounces *You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased* (Luke 3:23).

The sin of pride is not that of being pleased with life's accomplishments and milestones. The sin of pride – like the other deadly sins – is a twisting of things that are, by nature, good things, but when they are twisted and corrupted they become twisted and corrupting in the one in whom they take root. This is often the manner in which sin works – it allows us to believe that something is good for us when, in fact, it is quite damaging to us. The sin in the Garden, for instance, is such an example. The serpent doesn't exactly lie to Eve as much as he twisted the truth. He told her, *you surely will not die*, which was technically true, although the actions in the Garden unleashed spiritual death upon humanity.

In this sense, the Seven Deadly Sins become opposites of good impulses and the goodness that is within us. A professor of mine once asked our class to make a list of positive qualities. We named quite a few and he wrote them all on the board. After completing the list he explained how there is a *shadow side* to every good characteristic. A good work ethic, for instance, is a positive quality, but it can be twisted to its shadow side, which is to become a workaholic. To be a workaholic means to have an unhealthy preoccupation with work that allows us to avoid something in our lives or causes us to be driven to distraction, as being a workaholic is never really about work. In the same way, pride – the pleasure we feel in the accomplishment or achievement of a loved one becomes something else when it is twisted into an unhealthy self-love and sense of superiority over others.

2. *The Sin of Pride Is A Magnification of the Self Above Others.*

The story is told of two ducks and a frog who lived happily together in a farm pond. The best of friends, the three would amuse themselves and play together in their waterhole. When the hot summer days came, however, the pond began to dry up, and soon it was evident they would have to move. This was no problem for the ducks, who could easily fly to another pond. But the frog was stuck. So it was decided that they would put a stick in the bill of each duck that the frog could hang onto with his mouth as they flew to another pond. The plan worked well – so well, in fact, that as they were flying along a farmer looked up in admiration and mused, "Well, isn't that a clever idea! I wonder who thought of it?" The frog opened his mouth and said, "I did..."

(<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/p/pride.htm>)

Pride is, at its core, a sense of competition, as it is not content in what we have, but in having more than someone else (I am particularly indebted to C. S. Lewis on this point). Greed may drive us to accumulate more, but drives us with a desire to have more than someone else, and to glory in our ability to have more than another. It's not having more that is what matters; what matters is having more than someone else. It's not accomplishment per se, but being more accomplished than someone else, and it always, in some way, makes sure that others know they have been bested. It's summed up well in the words of a wise salesman who told a customer *let me show you something several of your neighbors said you couldn't afford*.

This is particularly dangerous when it comes to spirituality. There are few characteristics as distasteful as pride in the realm of spirituality and faith. The Pharisee in our passage this morning is very unlikeable, isn't he? He's unlikeable because of the insufferable self-righteousness that pours out of him. This is often on display, unfortunately. One of the presidential candidates actually said recently, *I'm a great Christian!* Do you really have to call attention to that fact, if it is indeed a fact? Shouldn't it be obvious whether or not a person is a great Christian?

The Pharisee is proud of his accomplishment of fasting twice a week and tithing. Those are not bad qualities, are they? I tried fasting some years ago. I wasn't very good at it. Ironically, fasting when far too slow for me. But I think it can be a very good spiritual quality, as tithing can be as well.

But what the Pharisee did wrong was to make those practices legalistic. Legalism takes something that is good and twists it into something far different, just as pride does. Legalism drives one to do something good, but for the wrong reasons. Legalism is faithfully following a practice but either forgetting or ignoring the meaning of the practice. For the Pharisee, he practiced good things – fasting and tithing – but for the wrong reasons. It was a competition to him. *I'm doing this better than others, and because I am, I'm better than others.* Legalism is dangerous because it has its basis in pride. Legalism allows us to construct a system of measures that are competitive – fast a certain number of days a year, give a certain amount of money, read a particular number of chapters of the Bible each day, go to a particular number of church functions each week – and if we are able to meet those standards more uniformly than others, then we can claim to be better people. The problem, however, is that when we devise the standards we usually do so in a way that is more accommodating to ourselves than to others, allowing for our own level of spiritual superiority to be easier to attain.

There is a difference between thinking we have done something well and thinking I am a really great person because of what I have done. Pride in spirituality, like what we see in the Pharisee, causes one to believe they are better than others because of what they have done and that God not only approves of them, but sees them as being better than everyone else.

3. *Pride Is Seldom Seen In Ourselves.*

The other evening I took an online test to see where I scored on the list of the seven sins. There were two where I scored higher than the others, indicating I was more susceptible to them. The two were *pride* and *gluttony*. I don't think I'm particularly gluttonous, but when it comes to sharing my chocolate, perhaps I am! I was surprised that pride was that high on my test, but that is the nature of pride; we just don't see it in ourselves.

In some ways we can feel sorry for the Pharisee, as we can see his pride but he cannot. It's embarrassing, isn't it, when someone exudes an insufferable pride and they cannot see it, but everyone else can.

Pride is very easy to recognize in others but rarely or ever recognized within ourselves. We will admit to many things, but rarely will one admit to being prideful, and rarely will anyone see that pride has taken root in their heart. C. S. Lewis warns that as soon as we begin to feel good about our spirituality and our faith we should take that as a warning that pride has taken root and started to grow within us, and I think he is exactly correct.

This is why Jesus says **3** *Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye* (Matthew 7:3-5).

4. *Pride separates us from God.*

This is very ironic, actually, as so much spiritual pride believes it brings one closer to God, but it doesn't, because at its deepest level, pride sees no need for God

Pride separates. Some vices will bring people together. If one is a glutton, they are happy to be a glutton with others, for instance. But pride always places a line of division between people. Pride and division, in fact, always go hand in hand.

Pride drives a wedge of division especially between humanity and God. It was pride in the Garden and pride at the Tower of Babel. Pride leads to a sense of self-sufficiency when it comes to our relationship with God, in the thinking that we do not need God's mercy and grace, as we can earn salvation on our own merits.

Benjamin Franklin settled on thirteen virtues that ought to be manifest in our lives, including Silence (*Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation*) Frugality (*Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; that is, waste nothing*) Industry (*Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions*) Tranquility (*Be not disturbed at trifles or at accidents common or unavoidable*).

He kept a notebook with a page for each virtue, lining a column in which to record "defects." Choosing a different virtue to work on each week, he daily noted every mistake, starting over every 13 weeks in order to cycle through the list four times a year. For many decades Franklin carried his little book with him, striving for a clean thirteen-week cycle.

As he made progress, he found himself struggling with yet another defect. *There is perhaps no one of natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it. Struggle with it. Stifle it. Mortify it as much as one pleases. It is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself...even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.*

(Phillip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Zondervan, 1997, p. 35)

This is why Jesus calls us to humility. In Matthew 5:3, 5 – part of the Beatitudes – Jesus says *blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* and *blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*. To be *poor in spirit* and *meek* is to demonstrate humility, which is sorely needed in today's world. How can we nurture a sense of humility in a world that often celebrates the demonstration of pride?

By staying tuned to Jesus. By emulating his humility. By turning away from pride.