

### **“7--Pride”**

When Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished. As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line. "Excuse me," Governor Herter said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?" "Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person." "But I'm starved," the governor said. "Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one to a customer." Governor Herter was a modest man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. "Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the governor of this state." "Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the chicken lady. Move along, mister."

Today we want to get our brains around the deadly sin of pride. The Bible talks about pride a lot, I've taught about it in different settings, and every time the question comes up, some of you are thinking it right now, **Is pride always bad?** Is it wrong to be proud of your kids and their accomplishments? Or your grandkids? Is it wrong to take pride in your work? Or on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July is it wrong to sing along with Lee Greenwood, "I'm proud to be proud an American"? Or what about me. Just two weeks ago I told you how proud I am of you as a congregation in how you serve this community, in how you give? Is that a sin?

Is pride always wrong? Well, remember that for all of the deadly sins, **Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, Pride**, they all start with something good. Gluttony begins with good things, good food, an enjoyment of food and other blessings that are gifts from God. But when appetites for those good things turn into a constant focus on consuming and it's always about more, more, more, and we're not content with what we have. That's when something good has gone very, very wrong. It enslaves us.

Sexual intimacy is a gift from God. But when we misuse this gift, or it becomes the focus of our lives and we start to worship it, it can kill our souls, our relationships, our connection to God. It enslaves us and becomes the deadly sin of lust.

When it comes to pride, there is such a thing as good pride. The Apostle Paul talks about this. He's writing about the church in the city of Corinth. **"I often boast about you; I have great pride in you..." (2 Corinthians 7:4).** So pride isn't always wrong. You're meant to be proud of your kids when they do something well. It is important that kids have healthy affirmation like that from their parents and grandparents. And when it comes to our country, we need to look and see the good things about our nation. I'm proud of you as your pastor, and you need to hear that. And if you've got skills and abilities, you're great at math, or as an electrician, or whatever that may be, you don't need to belittle yourself. You've got skills and those are good gifts. So there is a good kind of pride. But the bad pride can sneak up on us, and quietly start to burrow into our hearts, so it's important that we know what it looks like.

The Greek word for pride is **Hubris**. Hubris in the Greco-Roman world was considered the deadliest of all sins. Hubris meant a kind of pride where you sought to shame and humiliate other people. Hubris is putting other people down to make yourself feel better, or because you wanted to use your success to make others serve you. Putting other people down, and pushing yourself up. This is when pride became sinful.

The deadly sin of pride won't ever be confused with encouraging your kids, or blessing other people, or encouraging a congregation. Because the deadly sin is about making me feel superior, making me feel good about myself—often at the expense of somebody else.

This is particularly tempting when you've been successful in life, you've done well, you feel affirmed and you have very high self-esteem, it's tempting to believe all the nice things that people are saying about you, the affirming messages you get back. You can start to think, "You know what, I really am somebody! And not just somebody, an important somebody. And people had better give me what I deserve."

If you're at a place where you think you deserve a second piece of chicken because of who you are when everybody else just gets one piece, that's the sin of pride. Or you begin to think that the rules don't apply to you, or the laws don't apply to you, or that the things that God demands of all us don't really apply to you, that is the sin of pride. In the process you forget something really important, you are a creature of God, one of his children, his servant, a sheep in his pasture. You forget that you are like grass—green today, withered tomorrow.

So there's a healthy pride, then there's a degrading, deadly pride and we're supposed to keep those in balance. But let's be honest here. This is not simple. I know in my own life, most of the things I do are some sort of mixed bag of motives. I hope that someday I'll lose the ego part that gets involved in my decisions, if that's even possible. But I hope and pray that over the course of my life, as I make decisions and struggle with all the mixed motives, I hope and pray that I can submit my ego needs to my desire to do God's will. To strive to always say, "God, the first and most important thing I want to do is what you want me to do. I want to do what will most bless other people, and further your kingdom." And yes, somewhere down the list is what will satisfy my own desires and needs.

When we think about the struggle with pride, it manifests itself in lots of ways. It can show up in the things we do just to make a certain impression on people. I know in my life this happens all the time. What am I going to wear today in church and is that going to be OK or not OK—too casual for some, not cool enough for others? I try not to care about that stuff, but I do. It sneaks in.

I asked for some input from you on Facebook and a common response was about when somebody hurts you. How hard it is to say, "I forgive you, or I love you" when pride gets in the way. How pride keeps forgiveness from flowing.

Sometimes in marriage there will be a disagreement and ultimately it isn't about the issue at hand, it's about pride, two egos butting up against each other. But marriage can't work if all you have is two people filled with pride who are unwilling to compromise.

Sometimes pride shows up in our reaction when people tell us "no" to something. Like the governor and his chicken. When we don't get our way we can get really agitated—that shows we think the world should revolve around us—that's called narcissism. Lots of us struggle with pride taking the form of wanting our way, even when we might realize that it's not the best way, but when pride gets involved we can't take a step back and change our minds.

I've said things I shouldn't have said, I've gotten irritated because my pride was wounded, I've been overly concerned about what other people thought. I've been immovable because I thought I had to get my way. All that points to my struggle with pride.

And spiritual pride is an issue for us too. As we grow in Christ we're supposed to grow more like Jesus and more humble. But sometimes something else happens. As we get to know more and learn more about the faith, about the Bible, about theology, we can start to get puffed up with pride in our knowledge of God. In the process of learning about God and growing in our faith we can actually find ourselves becoming spiritually prideful. This can happen in whole movements of Christianity where a whole denomination thinks they're the only ones who have it right and everybody else has it wrong. They're going to heaven, everybody else to hell.

I have seen spiritual pride in me when I'm on vacation and go to another church and the minute I walk in I start picking things apart. "Oh boy, those greeters were terrible. Didn't say a word to us as we walked in. And that lobby was filthy. And they sure stumbled through some of that music, and the preacher had verb agreement errors not to mention that monotone voice..." In the midst of that I felt God recalibrating me, reminding me, "Aaron, what are thinking? Really, what are you thinking? Do you really think I can't speak and move in this place? Are you so full of yourself that you can't see me here? Because I am here." I can be pretty small at times. I'm ashamed in those moments. I've treated others in a prideful way.

We can get proud and arrogant when we see somebody struggling with a sin or an addiction that we don't have. We can subtly begin to think that somehow we're better than them.

Pride gets in the way of how we treat people. And I'm guilty of that, and God is working on me in that, and I'm getting better and better, and I'm quite proud of how humble I've become...oh wait! There I go again. It's hard isn't it?!

Listen, if you give in to the deadly sin of pride, here's what happens. You begin to lose all your friends because nobody wants to be around somebody who is full of themselves and lives only for themselves. You'll

be a very lonely person in the end. If you run a company and your company is filled with pride, you start to overreach and no longer pay attention to customers and employees, and that company is destined to fall.

If you're a nation that's full of itself, you find that other nations begin hate you and start to undermine you. Pride is deadly to all these. It's deadly to pastors and churches when we let it take over.

So how do we deal with the sin of pride? It starts with what we're doing right now. We name it so that we can recognize it. Paul wrote this in Romans, **"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you (Romans 12:3, NIV).**

Proverbs puts it this way, **"God humbles the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3:34).** What I know from life is that you can humble yourself or you can let God do it. If it gets to the place where God has to do it, it's a lot more painful than if you do it yourself. So the Bible says, **"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:10).** This theme winds its way through the scriptures.

So what does it look like to humble yourself? Jesus said that when you go to a banquet, or are a guest at a feast, don't walk in and sit down in a seat of honor, take the place of least honor and then if somebody wants to move you up, they will. He said, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." He said **"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45).** We see this theme over and over in the Bible. We also see kings and religious leaders who become prideful and how God humbled them. And this does happen in our lives. So you can either humble yourself, or you can let God do it.

True humility means to be in a right relationship with God. Being in right relationship to God reminds us that we're creatures and God is the creator. We're sheep and God is our shepherd. We are children and God is our heavenly Father. He is our master and we are his servants. When you remember that right relationship there's no room for pride because you recognize that all of life is a gift from God.

What we do here every Sunday is part of being in a right relationship with God. It's staking out time every week where we say, "God, no matter how busy, or tired I am. No matter how important some other things might be, you are more important." You come here and you sing praise to God, You're not singing praise to yourself, nobody else is singing praise to you, we're singing praise to God. That recalibrates our hearts.

You spend time in prayer and some of that is spent asking God for help, asking God for forgiveness, all that is acknowledging the relationship with God. We say the Lord's prayer together, "Hallowed be THY name, THY kingdom come, THY will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." in my life, on this earth everywhere. Not my will, or my kingdom. Your will, your kingdom. For yours, is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Gathering for worship helps address the issue of pride in our lives.

Oh and this is really cool. If you have self-esteem problems, having a right relationship with God let's you know that you are somebody, that you are loved more than you could ever imagine or believe. God knows you by name and he cares for you. Self esteem comes from knowing God's love for you, not from trying to please people or get them to like you. God already loves you! You can be self confident in a healthy way, because God is confident in you already! This right relationship is recognizing, "I belong to God, I am his."

And if you find yourself achieving a measure of success in life, being in a right relationship with God allows you to say, "I give God glory for all that I've been able to do. Thank you God for blessing me and allowing me to do this." I say that all the time about being a pastor here at Saint Paul's. "Thank you, God, that I get to do this." Yes, there are days when I want to run away. But most of the time it's a real rush, a real joy, a truly amazing thing to me, that I get to be a part of this church. Thank you. An attitude of gratitude saves you from thinking that it was all about you.

And talking about humility we have to picture Jesus the night before he's crucified. He says to his disciples, "I've got one more thing I need to teach you before they crucify me." And he kneels down and

washes his disciples' dirty feet. Then he tells them, "This is what it means to be one of my followers. Humbly serve one another." He's telling his followers for all of time, "If you want to be great, be a servant, humble yourself to others like I have humbled myself to you." When we do that, there's no room for the sin of pride.

Gary Morsch is an MD in Kansas City who started Heart to Heart International. He's done some amazing work in third world countries taking medical supplies to people in deep poverty. Several years ago he took a trip to Mother Teresa's ministry in Calcutta called the House for the Destitute Dying. He said he was really excited about the trip. He took 90 volunteers and 12 million dollars in medical supplies. He'd been there before and was saying, "Lots of people there are in such need and they don't have to die. I can save them! Maybe we could change the name from the House of the Destitute Dying, to the House of House of the Hopeful Living."

He arrives there, as a Physician, with his 90 volunteers and his millions of dollars of supplies and the first day Sister Priscilla begins to assign the volunteers for the week. "You go over here and do this and you go over here and do this." And as she starts this Gary gets out his stethoscope and puts it around his neck—he wants to make sure that Sister Priscilla knows he's a doctor. He waits as everybody is assigned a task. And he's the last one. He says, "I'm ready Sister Priscilla, what do you want me to do." She says, "Come with me." She leads him to the women's section and he thinks that's where he's going to serve, but they walk right through to the men's section and he thinks that's where he's going to serve, but they walk right through that to the kitchen. He's thinking, "Well, OK, I guess I can do this." But actually they walk right through the kitchen to the back door into the alley where all the garbage is dumped. There's this gigantic pile of rotting garbage. Sister Priscilla hands him two plastic buckets and a shovel and says, "What we need you to do is haul this garbage two blocks down the road and to the right to the city garbage dump. You can't miss it." She smiles at him and walks away.

He said, "There I stood, thinking, 'Did she not see my stethoscope? I'm a doctor, doesn't she understand what I can do with these hands.'" He says, "I'm standing there in silent shock, in a bit of self pity thinking, 'What do I do now?' So I just start shoveling and hauling that rotting garbage." He said, "I spent the day hauling buckets of garbage, two at a time, down to the dump. And by the time I got back that afternoon I was a sweaty, stinking mess. And I walked back into the House for the Destitute Dying and I looked up and saw a sign with this quote from Mother Teresa, **"We can do no great things, only small things with great love."**

He said, "At that moment my heart melted and on this day Mother Teresa pierced the armor I had worked so long to construct." His life was changed in that moment when he faced his pride and hauled garbage. Humility and servanthood. It not only affects others, but us.

Pride sneaks in so many ways, and we'll wrestle with it all our lives, but God's looking for us to actually wrestle it and invite him to help us see it and allow him to help us do something about it.

Peter wrote this for us, **"All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:5-6).**

And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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