

Sinning Like A Christian: Pride #2

“I Am the Next Best Thing!”

November 8, 2009

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

Girolamo Savonarola was an Italian monk, reformer, and martyr, and one of the great preachers of the 15th century. He preached in the great cathedral of Florence, Italy, which contained a magnificent marble statue of the blessed virgin Mary. When Savonarola started preaching at this great cathedral, he noticed one day an elderly woman praying before this statue of Mary. He then began to notice that it was her habit to come every day and pray before the statue.

Savonarola remarked one day to an elderly priest who had been serving in the cathedral for many years, *"Look how devoted and earnest this woman is. Every day she comes and offers prayers to the blessed Mother of Jesus. What a marvelous act of faith."*

But the elderly priest replied, *"Do not be deceived by what you see. Many years ago when the sculptor needed a model to pose for this statue of the blessed Mother, he hired a beautiful young woman to sit for him. This devout worshiper you see here everyday is that young woman. She is worshiping who she used to be."*

William Willimon writes, *If pride be a sin, it is a specifically Christian sin.* It is SO very easy to slip into prideful thoughts and actions. Even without our knowing it, pride can trip us up.

Benjamin Franklin understood this. He once said,

"There is perhaps none of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases-it is still alive. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it I would probably be proud of my humility."

Part of the problem with pride is that it is easy to see in other people but hard to see in ourselves. This was illustrated in a satirical cartoon that **The New Yorker** magazine ran several years ago—a cartoon in which a smiling woman was jabbering nonstop to a glum-faced companion. The smiling woman finally said, *"Well, that's enough about me. Now let's talk about you. What do YOU think about ME?"*

Pride is deceptive isn't it? As this cartoon shows, it blinds us and gives us a tunnel vision in such a way that we see everything through the lense of "me."

In fact, SELF is the FOCUS of pride. Pride seeks to defend and advance SELF in every way possible. In his book, *A Love Worth Giving*, **Max Lucado** writes, *"The self-centered see everything through self. Their motto? 'It's all about me!' The flight schedule, the traffic, the dress styles, the worship styles, the weather, the work....everything is filtered through the mini-ME in the eye."*

"I have often wished I had time to cultivate modesty, said **Dame Edith Sitwell**, the great poet and author, in a 1950 interview, *but I am too busy thinking about myself.*

The irony of it is Pride can be a very attractive virtue. We parents try to instill a sense of “self-worth” pride in our children even to the point of putting a bumper a sticker that says: *"My child is an honor roll student at Academic High School"*

Of course, there's another kind of pride which was displayed on the bumper of a pickup truck that said, *"My child beat up your honor roll student."*

What makes pride difficult is that there is a healthy pride and a very sinful side of pride. Two are intermingled together.

It's **good to take pride** in our churches, our schools, our communities, and even in ourselves. That is, pride is good when we are striving to make life better for everyone. A healthy pride is one that lets us see ourselves as having gifts that can make life better for everyone around us.

But the problem is, Jesus' exhortation to *"love your neighbor as thyself"* has been shortened to a hard and fast, ruthlessly enforced mandate: *love thyself!* Self love is the precondition of a happy life.

It seems in order to make anything of yourself in this society of ours you have to learn the trait of loving

thymself. You are number one.

Mohammed Ali, the great boxer, didn't suffer low self-esteem. When he was young and arrogant-just beginning his amazing career, Ali was on a plane and refused to fasten his seat belt. The stewardess came up to him and asked him to do so but he said, "*Superman don't need no seat belt.*" She looked at him and said, "*Superman don't need no plane.*"

I will submit to you today that this whole thing of self-esteem and being proud of who you are has been pushed to an unhealthy extreme, to the point of damaging one's ego. The things that are being taught to children about self esteem, and what is being said on the Oprah show centers around ME. It's all about ME.

William Willimon recalls a conversation with a crusty old prison chaplain. He said to the chaplain that the people who are being jailed must suffer from a "*warped sense of themselves. Lack of self-esteem*"

The chaplain corrected him by saying, "*that's bull, those guys are not in jail because they think too little of themselves, but because they think too much of themselves. Every one of them thinks he's a brilliant mind who is above the poor saps who obey the rules, go to work, follow the law. Every one of them thinks he's a genius and his victims are stupid.*"

That is what makes pride so devastating. Where is that line between having a good self identity without being prideful? Without even being aware of it, **self-respect quickly turns into self-infatuation.**

In a manner of speaking, pride is like the **tires on your car.** The tires don't function right if they are under-inflated or overinflated. Neither way is good for the tire.

Like automobile tires, it is important for us not to be under-inflated or overinflated in our opinion about ourselves. But unfortunately, while many people suffer from low self-esteem, most people have the tendency to overinflate themselves.

How quickly we begin to take credit in our achievements and our accomplishments and we fail to realize that the reason why we are able to do anything is only by the grace God. When we don't acknowledge the gifts that God has given us and the shoulders that we are standing on, we move close to idolatry of worshipping ourselves. The more we succeed, the more we accomplish, the greater the danger of being prideful.

Author Richard Thaler, a renowned economist, notes that some of our greatest successes are a prelude to some of our worst failures. He studied gamblers in Las Vegas and found that their greatest losses usually followed their biggest wins. Referred to as the winner's curse.

We all know of hundreds of examples of very successful Christian leaders who have taken a tremendous fall.

We are all familiar with the verse, **Proverbs 16:18**,
Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.

The Message put it this way,
First pride - then the crash - the bigger the ego, the harder the fall."

WHAT IS PRIDE?

The first and perhaps the deadliest of the seven deadly sins is pride. The Oxford Dictionary defines pride as an "*unduly high opinion of one's own qualities, merits, that is, an arrogant bearing.*"

In other words, pride is self-love that says, "*I'm better than you.*" You see pride in others when someone makes a boast of his or her accomplishment as though you are expected to pay homage. Prideful people want more than anything else to be "number one" - they seek greatness and superiority, even in ways that appropriately belong only to God.

Discipleship Journal, a few years back, wrote symptoms of what to look for in a prideful life. Listen and see if you recognize any of them in yourself:

- * Spotty prayer life - this suggests that we don't actively rely on God because we proudly think we can do it on our own without His help, which leads to a second symptom:
- * Weariness - the inevitable result of pridefully trying to do it all on our own strength.
- * Anger - can indicate that we are not trusting God's sovereign plan and timing and are upset when things

don't go OUR way-and they never do when we ignore God's guidance.

* A critical spirit is often found in prideful people - You see, the act of bringing others down especially when we do this to lift up ourselves points to an inflated sense of self.

* Taking responsibility for success, accomplishment, or financial prosperity - this may mean we have lost sight of God's gracious and undeserved provision.

* Impatience about having to listen, wait, serve, be anonymous, or be led by someone else also hints at an overdeveloped sense of importance-or PRIDE.

The book, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, **John Ortberg** lists two other symptoms of pride that I think would help us in diagnosing this problem in our own lives.

1. One is VANITY - or a preoccupation with our appearance or image. Ortberg says, that if we exercise with spandex there's a chance we have this problem-and, if we work out in a gym where there are mirrors on the wall and we watch, that's a strong sign as well. I would add-if you have a closet that is over-flowing with clothes-you could be vain and therefore ensnared by pride.

Lucado also writes about this particular aspect of pride and says, "*Suppose you are in a group photo. The first time you see the picture where do you look? And if you look good, do you like the picture? If you are the ONLY one who looks good, do you still like the picture? If some are cross-eyed and others have spinach in their teeth-but you still look good-do you like the picture? If that's what makes you like it even more, you've got a bad case of pride.*"

Another symptom of pride according to Ortberg is:

2. STUBBORNESS.

Proverbs 29:1 refers to this by saying, "*One who is often reprov'd, yet remains stubborn, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.*"

You see, stubbornness can be a form of pride-pride that causes us to shun needed correction. It renders us unable to stop defending ourselves. When someone points out an error or flaw, we evade or deny or blame someone else. When we become irritated at someone who has corrected us, and we hear ourselves saying, "*Who does he think he is correcting me?*" -- that's pride. Or when we are offended because we don't get the kind of recognition we think we deserve -- that's pride.

What about it? Do you often find yourself being defensive even when good friends or parents or siblings lovingly attempt to give you guidance? Do you find it difficult to admit wrong? Is it hard for your lips to form these three words, "*I was wrong?*" If your answer is YES, then there's a good chance pride has you ensnared in its deadly grip.

EXAMPLES OF PRIDE IN THE BIBLE

Pride is the root of all sin, or the greatest of sins, it does appear in the scriptures as one of the oldest.

* The serpent appealed to the Pride of Adam and Eve.

* It was the Pride of Cain that led him to resent so Abel that he killed him.

* Pride built Babel's tower. In their ambitious building project they said, *Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.*

* Pride of David that led to his sin to Bathseba.

* Proverbs 16:5, *The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.*

* Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness; it was pride. *Worship me and become empowered to set the world right to correct all of God's mistakes at creation*

* Paul urges the Philippians to renounce *Selfish ambitions.*

* In James 4:6, and I Peter 5:5, *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*"

As **Aquinas** noted, Pride is a virtually unavoidable sin. Tell someone, *Jesus wants you to be good, to do the right thing, to work for justice*, then Pride steps in and says, *I'll take over from here.*

What does God want out of us?

That famous verse in **Micah 6:8**, "*What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*"

Notice that Micah adds that phrase, *walk humbly with your God*.

Even in our little acts of justice and kindness we puff ourselves up like we have done some great achievements.

William Willomon says, *Pride insinuates itself even into our praise of humility*.

Two old men sitting in their synagogue during the Sabbath service overhear the loud lament of another worshiper near them: "*God, be merciful to me, a nobody!*"

One of the men looks at the other and asks, "*Who's this who thinks he's such a nobody?*"

Even in our honest confession of our sin, there can be the whiff of Pride.

We all know the story of the two men who went to the Temple to pray in Luke 18. One, a sleazy, good for nothing tax collector, collaborator with the Romans and swindler of his own people prayed, *God be merciful to me a sinner*.

The other man, an outstanding righteous, sacrificial, Bible-obeying person prayed, *God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income*. This man goes the second mile in living out his faith.

Jesus lands a zinger in saying, *I tell you, this man the cheating scoundrel went down to this home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted*.

What on earth are we supposed to do with that? *Ok gang, let's get out there and really be humble this week. Let's see if we can out humble the Catholics*.

The tax collector's humility wasn't a virtue, something he had worked at. It was simply a realistic assessment of his situation. He was a failure at being righteous. He had no hope of setting things right between himself and God.

Perhaps the Fathers of the Church called Pride the chief sin because it's the sin that strikes "good" people first. It is the sin that is not likely to hang out at church. It is the sin that is most likely for those of us who are Christ followers to break.

C. S. Lewis, "*There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty of themselves: PRIDE. Pride leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind*."

DAMAGING EFFECTS OF PRIDE

Why does God hate Pride

1. Pride hurts us in that it prevents personal GROWTH.

You see when we think we have it all together we don't have any motivation to keep learning and growing and developing and changing. **Proverbs 10:17** refers to this by saying, "*Anyone willing to be corrected is on the pathway to life. Any one refusing has lost his chance*."

Or, as someone once wisely put it, "

When the head starts swelling the mind stops growing."

The fact is pride keeps us from getting needed help.

* If we have MARRIAGE problems and we won't talk to anyone about it, that's pride.

* When we've got FINANCIAL problems and we don't want to admit it and ask for help, that's pride.

* When we're not cutting it as PARENTS- or when we're not making it AT WORK and don't want anyone to know about it-that's pride and it keeps us from getting help and therefore growing.

You see, pride makes us prefer to LOOK smart more than to BE smart.

2. A second reason God stands opposed to pride is because He knows it POISONS relationships.

The fact is, the root of all conflict and disharmony is pride.

As **Proverbs 13:10** says, "*Pride breeds quarrels*." Think about it. When we act out of pride we tend to be demanding and unsympathetic. We become obnoxious and rude-and who wants to be around someone like that?

When we shop for friends do we look for proud braggarts?

No-of course not. This old cliché phrase is so true: "*Pride is the only disease that makes everyone sick except the person who has it.*"

No one enjoys a relationship with a prideful person. Remember, selfless, giving love BUILDS relationships but prideful selfishness ERODES them.

So many conflicts in marriage and in parenting and in churches would never happen if it weren't for arrogance and pride. Usually the key to reconciliation is for us to simply swallow our pride. And if it helps, remember, pride is non-fattening!

So, God detests pride because He knows it hurts us-He knows it poisons relationships-but the main reason God opposes pride is because....

3. It makes a growing relationship with Him IMPOSSIBLE.

You can't even become a Christian until you first HUMBLE yourself and admit that you are a sinner and that you can't make it on your own-that you NEED Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

PRIDE is the wall that will keep any sinner from a relationship with God and God loves sinners so He hates pride. Pride can lead us to exclude God from His rightful place in our hearts and to bow down before a mirror instead. It is the main form of idolatry in society today. And we see it so clearly in our culture where people foolishly think they are greater experts on how to live than God.

Okay...how do we avoid the snares that pride sets? Or...if entangled, how do we free ourselves? I want to suggest two basic principles we need to follow.

1. First to defeat pride we must learn NOT take OURSELVES too seriously.

Speaking of popes, Lewis Smeades tells a wonderful story about Pope John XXIII.. Apparently a member of the curia was continually nagging him to fix this or that problem. This official in the curia lived as though he alone saw the severity of the problems facing the church and the world, and as if without his warnings everything would collapse.

Finally the pope had had enough, so he took his hyper-conscientious adviser aside and confessed that he, too, was sometimes tempted to live as though the fate of the world rested on him.

He was helped, he said, by an angel who would sometimes appear by the side of his bed and say, "*Hey there Johnny boy, don't take yourself so seriously.*"

I really hate to break the news to you. But if you were to drop dead at this moment, four things would happen:

- * We would all be in shock.
- * 911 would be called and you be taken to the hospital and be declared dead.
- * An undertaker would be called and there might be a viewing of the body.
- * Have a memorial service.

Guess what, life would continue to move on.

A year from now, someone would say, *Remember Johnny. Johnny who?*

This church would continue to move on. Someone will replace you at work. This community will continue to function.

To free ourselves from pride we must be focus on things that have eternal significance not temporal things.

James 1:17 says, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father.*"

And of course the most important PERFECT GIFT to remember is the gift of God's only Son. Above all else, this memory will help us to not take ourselves too seriously. When we look to the cross, we remember our sin. We remember that if it weren't for Jesus death on our behalf we would be separated from God and destined for Hell.

You see, the way to defeat pride is to re-direct it-to change it.

When we remember that anything good in us is only because of the grace of God, we transform conceit into praise.

2. ...but secondly-DO take the needs of OTHERS seriously.

In other words, embrace the opposite of pride-HUMILITY-and put the needs of other people above your own. **In fact, the truth is, humility is the mark of an emotionally HEALTHY person whereas pride is the mark of an emotionally INSECURE person.**

Humility is getting the focus off my needs, my desires, my hurts, my wants, and putting the focus on what other people need. Think of it this way: **Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is simply thinking less about yourself.**

I have had people say to me, *I don't want to come back to church because people are talking about me or thinking about me.* WRONG.

Humble people don't just sit around thinking about the needs of others-they do things to help others. Humility not just something a person has-it's something a person does.

Invitation

A lot of us need to do some serious work in this area.

"God, You made me. You redeemed me. What changes do I need to make in my life in light of what You've taught me today? What do I need to do in order to fully acknowledge You as Lord? You're the boss. You're the Creator. I'm the creature. Tell me what to do. Tell me what changes I need to make in my life, and I'll do it."

Words of a great hymn, **When I Survey the Wondrous Cross**

*"When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but lost,
and pour contempt on all my pride."
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ, my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.*

Let's all to that right now.

(The purpose of posting this sermon is for personal Bible study and resource material for pastors.)

Resource Material:

Adams, Mark: Sermon Series: Breaking Free: Seven Deadly Sins

DeYoung, Brebecca: Glittering Vices

Ortberg, John, The Life You've Always Wanted

Willimon, William: Sinning Like a Christian