

Deadly Sins and Life-Giving Virtues: Pride and Humility
Proverbs 16:17-19 Luke 18:9-14 Philippians 2:3-11

Our theme for the Sundays of Lent is: the 7 deadly sins. Woo-hoo! How many of you have heard of the 7 deadly sins? Studied them? Maybe practiced them with some regularity! Even if you can't name them all, let me tell you up front: we've all enjoyed them to some degree. So here they are, in no particular order (except pride is always first on every list, and I'll explain why in a moment): pride, wrath (anger), envy, lust, gluttony, sloth and greed.

We're only going to cover 6 of the deadly sins on Sundays during Lent since there are only six Sundays in Lent. So I don't have a Sunday during Lent to talk about greed. But that doesn't mean you're off the hook! I'd like to cover that topic when we return to the parables of Jesus after Easter. Jesus told a parable of warning about greed, and gave some good teaching about generosity—the virtue that acts a like a vaccine against greed. So we'll talk about that after Easter.

I want to be clear from the beginning, that the point of talking about the 7 deadly sins is not to make us feel horrible about ourselves or take us on a guilt trip. Many of us have been on that trip (the guilt trip)—several times, perhaps, and we find ourselves going back on that trip. Got the t-shirt, took the pictures; don't want to go back. I have an old friend who once said, "My parents were

travel agents... for guilt trips. I'm done going on those trips." We're not going there during Lent.

What we're doing in this series is not pulling a Jonathan Edwards from the mid-18th century, who preached a sermon titled, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." The image he used in his sermon: God is dangling you by a thread over the fiery abyss, and may drop you if you don't repent. That's not what we're about these next few weeks. And... that is not the gospel!

The goal in this series, and the purpose of the season of Lent, really, is to let the Holy Spirit do the work of renewal in our lives, and increase our capacity for love. The word "Lent" means "spring," and spring's purpose is the budding of new life and the renewal of the earth. And that's what this series is about. Think of it as tending the garden of our lives, removing the decay of winter, and preparing for the new growth that will be springing forth and emerging from the wintery cold and darkness. This is what we do during the season of Lent. We are going to invite some self-reflection, with the goal of seeking renewal and abundant life—now and after Easter. Which is why, along with each of the 7 sins we're also talking about the life-giving virtues, the good and positive practices and traits that increase our capacity for love.

Which leads to an important piece of background—a little history and explanation: The concept of the 7 deadly sins was developed in the 6th century by Gregory the Great. Btw, what made him “great” was that he basically saved Christianity from extinction by developing monasteries, where Christian documents and Biblical manuscripts were taken and were hidden and copied as the Roman empire fell and was ransacked, and books and scrolls of Biblical literature were being burned or destroyed. Not only were books and manuscripts saved, monks prayed and kept the faith as the dark ages were coming upon Europe. Were it not for Gregory the Great we wouldn’t have the Bible as we have it today. Anyway, earlier in his life he developed this idea of the 7 deadly sins.

Now, we know these as the 7 **deadly** sins, and we may wonder: why are they deadly? What makes them deadly? Glad you asked! They have been called deadly sins because...

Gregory the Great believed that the goal of the Christian life, and the mark of the Christian gospel, was love. It’s the greatest of the Christian virtues and first in line of the fruit of the Spirit. So, the 7 deadly sins were called deadly because they squelch love, the cardinal virtue. They are deadly to the love of God at work in our life, and deadly to our love of neighbor. And God wants us to know his love and show his love above all.

They are not deadly because they will kill us if we do them. They aren't deadly because God will smite us if we do them. Are we clear on that? They are deadly because they diminish love—they are deadly to God's love growing in us. They clog the flow of love into and out of our lives.

Therefore, we are going to look at 7 life-giving virtues alongside the 7 deadly sins. And the virtues that we are looking at alongside the sins **grow** love and open up channels for God's love to flow into and out of our lives. That's the goal of the Christian life.

Some writers have described these 7 sins as *misdirected* love. As love gone astray and misapplied. For example, pride could be looked at as love turned inward, or misapplied to myself; gluttony is misapplied love of material goods at the expense of contentment and living simply; sloth is love of comfort and ease at the expense of spiritual vitality and flourishing—you get the idea.

All of the sins could be described as good desires which have become disordered, misdirected, or gone to excess. Which is why we need spiritual practices and transparency before God and in community with our sisters and brothers in Christ, in order to bring these good desires into their proper expression in God, and so we can fully know God's love and express God's love. It all comes back to the love of God in our lives.

This morning we begin with pride. And humility.

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

This is the word of the Lord.

We begin with pride. Many of the classic writers say pride is the only real sin, or at least the chief of all sins because all the others flow out of pride. So there is a reason it's first in the list. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, pride is the very nature of the devil. Satan fell because of pride. Unwilling to submit God's authority and gracious design he rebelled, believing he knew better than God how to rule. And the famous line from Satan in *Paradise Lost* is: "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

Pride was at the heart of what we have called original sin: Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent with these words: "If you eat of this, you won't die; *you'll be like God.*" Oooo, that sounds good. And Genesis 3:5 says that when the first humans saw that the tree was to be desired *to make one wise*, they took and

ate. There was a desire to be as wise as God, to be as God. Rather than live humbly *under* God's wisdom and authority.

But what makes pride such a trap for us is that it's so subtle, and can be hard to detect in ourselves. Where is the line between having a healthy sense of ourselves, and being full of ourselves? Between confidence and cockiness?

Mohammed Ali's famous line was: I am the greatest! True statement or prideful boast? Or both? Or maybe he was just entertaining us. (he was a great guy!)

Let's talk about what deadly pride is not: it is not the feeling of delight in being affirmed, genuinely and truthfully, for who you are as a person, or for something good that you have done. We're not experiencing the sin of pride when we do something well and feel good about it. "I am proud of myself" can be said with humility and truthfulness. Sinful pride is *not* that feeling you have when you are proud of your kids and grandkids, or your spouse, or of your favorite sports team. That can be a good kind of pride.

But it is a subtle distinction. When do we cross the line from being genuinely proud of ourselves, or of someone or something, to having a self-love that competes with God and God's leadership?

President Lyndon Johnson was known for his grandiosity and larger than life personality. German chancellor Ludwig Erhard came to the US when Johnson

was president, and was visiting Johnson's ranch in Texas, and said to him, "I understand you were born in a log cabin." Johnson replied, "No, no, you have me confused with Abe Lincoln. I was born in a manger." Was he joking?

What is deadly pride? What does the kind of pride that kills love look and act like? Let me suggest two ways that pride is often manifested. There are other manifestations of pride, but here are two are substantial ones.

1. When I have the need to be right. George Bernard Shaw (Irish playwright with a great ironic wit): "The longer I live the more I see that I am seldom wrong about anything, and that all the pains I have so humbly taken to verify my notions have only wasted my time." (that may have been his Irish wit... who knows)

Before getting married I received lots of unsolicited advice, but the only piece of advice I remember was from a friend who had been married a couple years; he said: "It doesn't matter whether you're right or wrong, but how you say what you say. Because there is a way of being right that makes you wrong." There is a way of being right that makes you wrong. Does that ring true to you?

Years ago when I was on a vacation Heidi and I visited a church, and the sermon title for the morning was: "Do you want to be right, or do you want to be

well?” Since then I have heard several versions of that: Do I want to be right, or do I want to be happy? Do I want to be right, or do I want to have relationships?

Along that line, one of the points made in the sermon was that when we need to be right, it isolates us from others; it makes us lonely people—like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. Jesus points out that he was standing by himself. That’s an important and easy to miss part of the story. He’s alone in his feeling of superiority.

1Cor. 13: the famous love chapter. It’s often associated with weddings, but it’s not a text about marriage. It’s part of a letter written to a church that was struggling with issues of pride—spiritual pride and feeling superior to others who aren’t manifesting all of the spiritual gifts like they were. So the apostle Paul has to remind them: if I speak in the tongues of humans and angels, and have all the spiritual gifts, and all knowledge, and I’m smart and eloquent and witty and right, but don’t have love, it means nothing. I’m just fingernails screeching on a chalkboard. I’m a muffler dragging along the ground behind a car.

We get to those lines where Paul says “love is patient, love is kind, love is not arrogant or boastful or rude.” Then he says, “love does not insist on its own way.” The emphasis is on the word ‘insist.’ There is nothing wrong with desiring to do things our way, or thinking we might be right, or that, hey, I think I have a

good idea. But love and humility suggest that others might be right too; and maybe my way isn't the only way, or the best way. Love and humility may mean believing that I'm right, but seeing that in the way I'm being right, I'm wrong.

Deadly pride, the kind that kills love, is when I *need* to be right or *insist* on having things my way. Now the truth is, it's a good and legitimate thing to be right, and many of us *are* right about many things much of the time. It's just when my *need to be right* becomes more important than my *decision to be loving*, that I probably need to ask God for help. And reading and re-reading the passage from Philippians 2 would be a good place to begin!

2. A second manifestation of pride is when I compare myself to others, and find myself superior. Or, I find others inferior. That is the sin of pride Jesus is describing in the parable he tells us in Luke 18. Here is a presumably good and righteous man, and there is nothing wrong with his piety or his life. His problem is that he compares himself to someone else and finds himself superior, and the other man inferior.

In the Old Latin translation of the Bible (that the Catholic Church has used) the word we translate into English as "pride" is, in Latin, "superbia"—not suburbia (where a lot of sin happens, like everywhere else)—but "superbia" (meaning

“above”). The word itself is wonderfully self-explanatory. I am... superb. In a not-so-humble sort of way.

CS Lewis, from *Mere Christianity*, explains it well: “Pride gets no pleasure out of having something; only out of having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, cleverer, or *better* looking than others. It is the comparison that makes you proud; the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride is gone. That is why I say that pride is essentially competitive in a way the other vices are not.”

This was the sin of the Pharisees, who not only thought they were better than others, but believed that *God* thought they were better than others. And that is when pride becomes most deadly. When I believe that God has favorite children, and I believe I’m one of them. Jesus’ moral of the story at the end of his parable is: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (23:12). Which leads to...

The antidote to pride—the vaccine, if you will—which is humility. Humility is in many ways the opposite of pride. But I’d like to put this in different terms for us. Because we can’t really say, “I’m going to be humble now.” That almost sounds prideful. When we begin to say the word “humble” about ourselves,

we've lost it. Because humility isn't so much a virtue—something you strive for like faith, hope and love. Humility is more like a side effect, or a character trait, of people who are *right sized* about themselves. Who seek to have an honest and accurate view of themselves. Not thinking *less* of themselves, or *putting themselves down*, but being *right sized*, and truthful. That's a good definition of humility: being right-sized about ourselves—the good and positive, and the shadowy side. And knowing that we are loved by God *as we are*—and so we don't have to puff ourselves up, or put anyone down (including putting ourselves down). We're all in this together. We're on level ground together as human beings. Isa 40, during Advent: "Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low, and the rough places made plain at the Lord's coming." He is proclaiming that, at the incarnation, Jesus came to be on level ground as a human, with us all, and that everyone is on level ground. And Jesus modeled that for us during his life.

God doesn't want us to feel put down or see ourselves as less—that isn't true humility. God simply wants us to be honest and truthful about who we are, and in doing so he *builds us up* in love. In a process of becoming our real and true self.

Put another way, humility means being down to earth about ourselves. If pride is up here, in the clouds, trying to be above others (trying to climb the caterpillar pillar, stepping over others, as in the book *Hope for the Flowers*), humility is *grounded* in reality—down to earth. In fact, the word “humble” or “humility” comes from the word “humus” which means earth. Ground. Rich, fertile soil. That’s actually where the growth happens! Humility is being down to earth. Grounded in reality. About ourselves, and about God.

But more than that, true humility is cultivated when we take our eyes off our ourselves and focus on serving and loving others. Humility happens when I see others, not as people to compare myself to or compete with, but as people whom God loves, and whom Jesus came to save.

So, the real antidote to pride is love. Loving and serving others. Here’s a spoiler: love is going to be the antidote to all of the 7 deadly sins! And love is manifested in a rich variety of ways, as we’ll see.

Paul reminds us of this in Philippians 2, as we heard earlier:

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others more than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. And he reminds us that our example is Jesus:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

And during Lent we are invited to take up our cross, with Jesus, and follow.
And thus be reminded of the way of love.