

Pride

First in a series on vices and virtues.

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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"... all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

Some time after we moved to Carlisle I got a phone call one day. A man I didn't know said, "Jim, do you like to play squash?" I said I played racquetball but I'd never played squash. "Would you like to learn?" he asked. I said, "Sure," and that was the beginning of a couple of good friendships.

The man who called was Joe Jensen, one of nine retired pastors affiliated with Second Pres. Now I was pretty athletic in my day. When I was 12, I was on a baseball team that went to the Bronco League World Series, and my college volleyball and touch football teams won the intramural competitions at Yale. So I thought, "This is good. This older guy will teach me a game I always wanted to know, and I'll just take it easy on him."

Well, the first day on the court, Joe positioned himself near the center, and effortlessly put the squash ball wherever I was not. The faster I moved and the harder I lunged, the easier it was for him to send the ball someplace else. I was running all over the court while, as far as I could tell, all that was moving on Joe were his wrist and his smile. He never broke a sweat.

This went on for months, with my scoring a few points and Joe winning every game by a huge margin. One day I finally asked him, "How old are you anyway?" He thought for a moment and said, "Well, I guess I'll be 84 on my next birthday." I was roughly half his age.

More months went by, and I gradually improved, until one night Gwenn and I were playing cards with a couple of women from the church, and Gwenn asked, "How was your game today?" I said triumphantly, conscious of the three women around the table, "I beat him!" Lois, who was on the search committee that called me to Second Pres, looked up from her cards and said flatly, "Yeah, but the guy is 95 years old." I said, indignantly, "He is not 95, he's only 85!" As

the words came out of my mouth, I thought, "That's the most pathetic self defense I've ever heard."

I've had lots of opportunities in my life to think about pride, and its opposite, humility. Maybe you have too. One of my favorite scriptures is Proverbs 16:18: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." I'm so familiar with it because the reminder comes so often.

"Pride" is a funny word, because in English it means some things that are good, and other things that are not good at all. My dictionary defines pride first as "A sense of one's own proper dignity or value; self-respect"; or "Pleasure or satisfaction taken in an achievement." Those are good things. On the other hand, the dictionary also defines pride as "Arrogant or disdainful conduct or treatment; haughtiness"; and "An excessively high opinion of oneself; conceit."

How is it that the same word can mean things that are good and things that are bad? That points to an insight Aristotle had long before Christ came: virtues are the golden mean between two extremes. Aristotle would have said, as modern psychologists would say, that a lack of self-respect, or a willingness to let others walk all over you, is unhealthy and bad for the soul. But on the other hand, so are arrogance and conceit, thinking of yourself as better than everyone else and being unwilling to learn from others. We all know people who are often in error but never in doubt. The virtues, Aristotle said, live between the extremes.

When Christians talk about pride as a vice – one of the Seven Deadly Sins – they mean something like excessive self regard, an egocentricity that keeps us from seeing things in perspective and ordering our priorities well.

Of course, Christianity teaches that human beings are made in the image of God, and in that sense we are infinitely valuable, all of us. Our self esteem comes ultimately from being precious to God.

That said, though, pride in the negative sense has always been one of the Seven Deadly Sins in Christianity. In fact, it's the first and worst of the deadly sins. The reason is that if I am the center of my life, then nothing else can be the center. If everything revolves around me, then no one else, not even God, can guide me.

Pride is such a problem because it can be so subtle. Everyone knows that being arrogant or conceited is a bad thing. At least it's bad form. We make fun of people who are full of themselves. Ted Baxter, the news anchor on the old *Mary*

Tyler Moore Show, Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*, and Lancelot in *Camelot* were funny because they were so obviously conceited. Literature is full of those characters, and we laugh at them.

Everybody knows that it's bad to be arrogant or conceited, but what makes pride deadly is that it goes underground. Pride has a closet full of masks to disguise itself, so that the people who are most full of pride don't even know it.

One of pride's masks is righteousness. So in Jesus' parable, the Pharisee prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." Then he reminds God of his own virtue: "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

Now here's the insidious thing. The Pharisee *does* have some virtues. Fasting and tithing are good things. And refraining from particular sins – not stealing and not committing adultery – those are good things too. The Pharisee's problem is that his righteousness is a mask for self righteousness. If love is the great commandment, as Jesus says, then the Pharisee's virtues hide and feed a greater vice: the failure to love his neighbors – especially the neighbors he looks down upon, like the tax collector.

Jesus' point is not that the tax collector is a better person than the Pharisee. The tax collector has plenty of faults. He's probably been a thief, stealing from the tax receipts. But when he comes to the temple, the tax collector knows his faults and he begs forgiveness. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He wants to change, and God can work with that. God can heal a heart that wants to be healed. But there's not much God can do for the Pharisee. The Pharisee doesn't think he needs anything. He thinks God should be satisfied with the way he is. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people."

The deadly sins are deadly because they cut us off from the one thing that can save us: the grace of God that surrounds us, but only enters the heart that lets it in.

You see how subtle it is? Vice hides behind virtue. We read this parable in our staff Bible study on Tuesday and somebody said, "I could hear myself thinking, 'Boy, I'm glad I'm not like that Pharisee!'" Maybe we're not like the Pharisee in obvious ways. We don't stand up and pray, "God, thank you for making me better than everyone else." But are we like the Pharisee in subtle ways? Who are the people we despise, or look down upon, and we're glad that we're not

like them? Whose needs do we ignore because we tell ourselves we've done enough already, and God should be happy with the way we are?

Pharisaism is a subtle thing, as subtle as pride. It's no coincidence that Jesus' greatest antagonists were religious people: the scribes, the chief priests, and the Pharisees. Why? Because vice so often hides behind a façade of virtue.

The opposite of pride, and its antidote, of course, is humility. Humility has a bad reputation in some circles. Some people think it means being weak, or not being assertive enough. But that's wrong. Humility is in fact a sign of strength. Humility is being strong enough not to need the pretensions of pride, because the humble person's strength comes from somewhere else. If we know that we are God's children, forgiven for our sins, and strengthened by grace to do whatever God calls us to do, why do we need to be proud? If we trust in God's goodness and righteousness, why do we need to lift up our own?

Humility is not false modesty. It's not pretending that we are less than we really are. Humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less. But to the extent that we let pride go, a funny thing happens. God lives in us more richly, and uses us more fully, and we find that we're happier and more productive, because a power much greater than our own is at the center of our life.

Jesus tells his disciples, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." But by the time we're doing greater works, our souls will be big enough, and humble enough, to handle it. We'll delight in being part of the great things God does in the world, but we won't need to claim greatness for ourselves. It will be the best of both worlds, I think: the joy of knowing God here and now, and a taste of the world to come, where the idea of being proud will strike everyone as just plain silly.