

Pride and Humility  
Ezekiel 28:1 – 9; Luke 4:1 – 13; Philippians 2:5 – 11  
Sunday, March 10, 2019

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a 40-day season in which we prepare our hearts and minds for the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday. A lot of times we think of Lent as the season in which we *give up* something, like chocolate, alcohol, or social media. We give it up for 40 days, only to pick it back up when Lent is over. But the original *intention* of Lent and of giving things up was to purge our lives of sin. To rid our lives of the things that draw us away from loving God and loving one another. To resist the temptations of the world, as Jesus did for 40 days in the wilderness, and trust in God, rely on God to sustain us. *Easter* comes from a word that means “spring,” a season of new life and rebirth. It’s a time in which we are called to die to sin and the old way of life and begin a new life, resurrected with Christ.

But the question for a lot of people over the centuries has been, “How do we *know* what we need to rid our lives of? How do we *know* what in our lives is sin, and how do we resist it?” I mean, it’s one thing to *identify* a sin in your life, but what do we *do* about it? That’s not always an easy thing to *know* or *do*. We give up eating chocolate for Lent, but eating chocolate is not a *sin*. We give up social media, but social media is not a *sin*. Those things *can*, however, point to something *deeper* at work within us. They are not *sins* in and of themselves, but they can be *symptoms* of sin in our lives. So how do we go *deeper* to identify the places in our lives that need to be made new?

Back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a group of Christians who shunned the world, sold all of their possessions, gave the money to the poor, and went to live in the desert outside of Egypt. These Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers, as they were called, spent the rest of their lives in solitude and prayer, copying and memorizing scripture, reflecting and writing on what it means

to follow Jesus Christ. One of the things that they did was to compile a list of seven or eight evil thoughts or spirits that one needed to overcome: gluttony, fornication or prostitution, greed, pride, sadness (at the fortune of others), wrath, boasting, and dejection. These were the things that they were working to shun in the desert. Eventually, this list made its way to Europe, where in the year 590 A.D., Pope Gregory revised it into a list of Seven Deadly Sins; seven conditions or temptations that are the root of all these other sins in our lives. Gregory's list was lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. The Seven Deadly Sins became popularized over the centuries in literature like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Dante's *Purgatory*, and the 1995 Brad Pitt movie *Seven*. The church used this list of sins to help people identify and curb their inclination toward sin before it took them too far down that path.

Now, what is *less* well known (because *sin* is always more exciting than *virtue*) is that they also made an accompanying list of Seven Heavenly Virtues designed to *counter* the Seven Deadly Sins. The idea was that if you focus on these good, admirable, virtuous concepts, it will help keep you from these sins. The Seven Heavenly Virtues are chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, forgiveness, kindness, and humility. Brad Pitt did not make a movie about any of these.

So as we enter into this season of Lent and seek to be intentional about cleansing our lives of sin that we might find new life in Christ, the sermons each week are going to focus on one of these sins and its accompanying virtue. The hope is that this can help us identify those deeper issues in our lives that we need to turn away *from* and give us something to turn *to*. And we are going to start this week by looking at *pride* and *humility*.

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Pride has always been identified as the *worst* of the Seven Deadly Sins. We've heard the expression, "Pride comes before the fall;" that more than any of these other sins, going down the path of pride will cause you to fall away from God. If you look up *pride* in the dictionary, it is defined as "a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority." We get that; thinking too much of yourself. But it is *also* defined as "a feeling of honor and self-respect; a sense of personal worth; satisfaction or pleasure taken in one's own or another's success or achievements." What's wrong with *that*?

I'm *proud* of my children. I've poured a lot of time and energy into my doctoral studies, and I am *proud* of what I have learned and the work that I have done. I can remember summer days where I would spend hours mowing the lawn and landscaping, and when I finished, I would step back and look at it all and feel *proud* of how it looked and the way it reflected on our home. I don't think of that feeling as a *sin*. I think it's something the world needs *more* of – people who take *pride* in their families and their homes and their work and their appearance. And the thing is, that's not what we're talking about when we talk about pride as one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

I recently read a definition of pride that goes like this, "Pride is thinking, acting, believing, living as if we do not need God. It is putting the self at the center, and – tragically – pride shuts us off from the work of grace and the healing of redemption." The kind of pride that we are talking about here is this feeling of what I *have* and what I have *done* is by *my own ability*.

Look at our reading from Ezekiel. Ezekiel is talking to the Prince of Tyre, this incredibly powerful man. And he says to him, "Because your heart is proud and you have said, 'I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods.' By your wisdom and understanding you have amassed wealth for yourself. By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has

become proud in your wealth. But you are a mortal, and no god, even though you compare your mind with the mind of a god. And because of this, God will bring strangers against you to destroy you and show you just how powerless you are.” The Prince of Tyre thinks, acts, believes, and lives as if he does not need God, because he thinks he *is* God. He thinks that what he *has* and what he has *done* comes only from his own power and ability. He has shut himself off from the work of grace, because he doesn’t need anything from anyone. Sinful pride is when we look at our lives and fail to see the grace of God in our abilities and accomplishments.

I have pride in my children, in their accomplishments and how they are learning and growing. But I recognize that none of that is by my own doing. My children are a gift from God, and all that they *are* and are able to *do* is by the grace of God in their lives. I am proud of the work that I have done in my doctoral studies. It has been a *lot* of work. But throughout it all, I keep getting reminded that it is not by my own knowledge and ability that I am able to do this. Because there have been plenty of times where I am absolutely overwhelmed and wonder how in the world I am ever going to get this done. But it is the grace of God, God’s Spirit giving me the wisdom and understanding that I lack on my own. I am proud of this church – the loving, compassionate, kind ways that I see you living out your faith together, especially this past week. But I didn’t make you that way. God did.

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Jesus went out into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil. And look at the *ways* in which he was tempted, as well as his *responses* to those temptations. The devil says, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” To which Jesus says, “One does not live by bread alone.” Mathew’s account of this story has him saying, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” He recognizes that his needs are more than he can provide for himself. He is dependent upon God.

The devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority, if you will worship me.” And Jesus replies, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

Finally, the devil takes him up to the highest point of the Temple and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here and trust that God will save you.” To which Jesus says, “It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Each step of the way, Jesus is tempted to take pride in his own ability and live as if he does not need God. And each step of the way, he affirms his absolute *dependence* on God. And *that* is humility. Taking the self out of the center and living in the awareness that I am not God; that on my own, I am not enough to make all of this work. That I depend on God and others. It is giving credit where credit is due and not unduly glorifying yourself. It’s recognizing your own limits and needs. It is living in ways that say, “All that I *am* and all that I *have* is a *gift from God.*” *That* is what we see in Jesus.

And Paul says to the Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.” Jesus so centered his life on God’s power that he did not have to hold on to anything, not even his own life. He could let go of it all, trusting that God would give him everything he needed.

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This has been a difficult week in the life of our church, with Ridgley having to go on medical leave and our *concern* for her and the uncertainty about what this all means and what the future

holds. And we're tempted to respond in one of two ways. We can throw up our hands and say, "What are we going to do?! How are we going to make this work?! There's too much to do!" Or we can say, "We got this. We can get this done. We will do everything we need to do to make this work." But those are responses that place us at the center of all of this. Neither of them affirm our dependence on God and recognize God's power at work among us. The *humble* response is one that says, "By the grace of God, *Ridgley* is going to be okay, and *we* are going to be okay. God is going to give us all everything we need to do what God is calling us to do."

And that is the humble response in *every* aspect of our lives. To say, "By the grace of God – and *only* by the grace of God – I can *do* this and make it through this."

It's like Paul says later in this letter, "I can do all things *through him who strengthens me.*" Not by my own power and ability, but by God's.

What does it look like in *your* life to place God at the center; to affirm in real, concrete ways your dependence on God; to recognize that all that you *are* and all that you *have* is a *gift*, the grace of God in your life? Not to hold on to your own power and ability, but to hold on to *God's*. The journey of Lent is a process of dying to self that we might find new life in Christ. And on that journey, we need all the help we can get.