

“The Seven Deadly Sins: Pride”

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11 Luke 4: 1-13

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Pride is that overweening self-assertion which tragically distorts people’s relationships with God, with each other, even with themselves. This pride is no occasional social *faux pas* but the invariable disrupter of society, human and divine. – Theodore A. Gill

I like reading all sorts of book on how to succeed at business. They are inspiring. I also like going back and re-reading them 10 years later, to ask, “How’s that working out for you?”

As in the example of The Chief Executive Officer who had proclaimed his company was “the finest organization of any American business.” The CEO was Kenneth Lay, head of Enron. How’s that strategy working out for you? The story is a case study in pride.

Some companies don’t wait that long to implode. The recent story of the Fyre Festival: a luxury music festival that proclaimed they would bring in the top bands in the world, scheduled to play for a whole week, all billed to take place in the Bahama’s at Pablo Escobar’s private island, with luxurious accommodations and sumptuous meals.

The two young organizers Believed in themselves, believed in their dream, believed in their company’s ability hire musical talent. But when the concert goers arrived they discovered they were put in FEMA type tents with blow up mattresses, and served cheese sandwiches in Styrofoam containers. Not one of the bands showed up. The organizers of Fyre Festival face legal cases to the tune of 100 million dollars. I suggest it as another case study in pride.

We are exploring the 7 Deadly Sins this Lenten season. Today I want to talk about pride, but the problem with talking about pride is there are just so many great examples.

Start with the Greeks; they saw people in positions of authority as having the greatest temptation to pride. The myth of Achilles – the greatest soldier in the world -- his pride led him to think he was invincible. But he forgot Lieutenant Dan’s (from the movie Forrest Gump) #1 rule of soldiering: take care of your feet. The Achilles heel of Achilles was really himself. Which is to say, his own pride.

Most arrogant of all, is the myth of Hercules, whose superior strength led him to conquer impossible tasks, but whose pride led him in to countless battles, widespread destruction, multiple bouts of madness and eventually death. Hercules is a case study of pride that reveals what is best in us can become the worst in us.

In English literature, there is, of course, Jane Austin's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, where Mr. Darcy nearly loses Elizabeth due to his being so impressed with himself.

In the movie world, the Cohen brother's recent film, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, is the story of the world's greatest gunslinger and song singer. From his pride he brings upon himself an even greater gunslinger and song singer. That's why the movie about Buster Scruggs is so short.

Motivational speaker Tony Robbins seems to have all the answers to life's problems. One of his secrets to success was the virtue of eating fish. All over the world: tells people: eat fish! Then he got really, really sick. The police even investigated his wife: thought she was poisoning him. It was mercury poisoning: too much fish!

So many examples.

Last week we said, envy has no song. Pride has lots of songs.

Carly Simon: "You're so Vain." Suzi Bogoss & Davy Vain:

"You Can't Deal Me All the Aces, and Think I Wouldn't Play."

Mac Davis: "Oh Lord, It's Hard to Be Humble, When You're Perfect in Every Way." There are endless myths, stories and songs about pride.

For every one of these stories, on the one hand, pride leads them to attempt incredible things. On the other hand, pride contains the seeds of its own destruction. So let's unpack the idea of pride.

It is a complex idea, so let's find our way toward a working definition.

There are two different dimension of pride.

On the one hand, pride is considered a positive emotion. Simply put, this dimension of pride is self-respect. Feeling good about one's-self. Having a sense of self-worth especially after an extraordinary effort that lead to success and satisfaction, gets reinforced by positive approval from other people.

That kind of pride helps a person get out of bed in the morning. Healthy sense of pride makes you care about your work, about the way you look, about how you live, relationships with other people. It has to do with dignity. It is good for individuals to feel positive about themselves. And it is good for groups of people to feel affirmed about their group.

But there is a teeter totter effect on pride: when it tips past the balancing point. The other side of pride. From our best can come our worst.

Pride as what the Greeks called "hubris." It begins with an overblown sense of confidence. Tragic arrogance. Hubris is about being full of yourself. Believing your own press clippings. A winning streak that leads one to think they are bullet proof. Pride leads people to feel superior. Entitled. Distant. Above it all. A belief that one can predict the future, and control it.

Some ancient theologians thought of pride as the lynchpin sin. The root of all evils. The most terrible sin.... and the most common.

Another classic piece of literature comes to mind: Mary Shelly's Frankenstein. When it comes to the movie version, don't think of the Boris Karloff version. I like Robert De Niro version.

In the story, the inventor is Victor Frankenstein. The creature is always referred to as the Creature. The inventor creates the Creature, then abandons him. The Creature is all alone, and seeks revenge: if the Creature has no one to love, he will destroy Victor's loved ones. They meet on a glacier: a sea of ice. The Creature confronts Victor and with anger and poignancy, challenges him, wanting to know why, after inventing him, he abandoned him. The Creature says: "Did you ever ask ... what would happen to me?"

In Frankenstein, the inventor is the monster. His pride makes him the monster.

The question that confronts pride: Did you ever ask what would happen to me? Pride does not ask what would happen to others.

Have you ever noticed that if you just stop caring about other people, you can have it all, do it all, own it all, you can be all you want to be? Pride avoids the hard questions: asking what will happen to others when we separate ourselves from them.

Pride says prisons are the answer, but never asks what happens to the people inside.

Pride avoids the hard data of science, looking at the ways the creatures about being devastated, from elephants to butterflies.

Pride evades the question of our stewardship of the earth.

Inordinate pride causes the prideful their own destruction. Those things about us that are most worthwhile, can easily become a source of arrogance. What is best about us can become what is worst.

Pride turns one's own perspective into an idol. Racism. Sexism. Homophobia. Types of false pride where we think our way is the only way.

Pride is more than arrogance or snobbery. Pride is the presumption by which we put ourselves in the place of God. (WDCE).

The Biblical story of the Tower of Babel is the most misinterpreted story in the bible. It is not about a tower being too tall, nor a babbling of languages, but a Tower where only one point of view was seen.

An idolatry. Its' idolatrous prideful uniformity brings about its' own destruction.

Saint Augustine put it so well. He said: "The original evil is when a human being regards the self as their own light." ("Pride, WDCE)

Remember, Positive pride can lead people to push themselves, and transcend what they expected of themselves. Positive pride helps people accomplish some great things.

However, as Steven Aicinena notes:

“in the pursuit of success and the afterglow of achievement, we may deem ourselves special and, therefore, above the rules and standards of behavior set forth by society.... We may come to believe ourselves to be worthy of special treatment and take license to do as we please regardless of the harm we may do to others.”

Pride involves something like what psychologists refer to as “oppositional defiant disorder.” Pride is first an act of defiance. Defy other people, defy norms of society, defy standards of the morality, defy the law, defy God. Then pride implodes.

But the Christian understanding is that hubris is not something that affects only the rich and the famous, but all of us. One can even be prideful of how humble you are. That your piety will make you self-righteous and proud. “Oh, Lord it’s Hard to Be Humble, when you’re perfect in every way.”

Our dialogue partner this Lent is the classic poet Dante and his insights on the Seven Deadly Sins. In Dante’s vision, if you look down the slopes of the inferno, hell has all these different layers. Usually, when people think about hell, they think of lots of fire. But for Dante, in the deepest layer in the inferno, there is not fire, but rather a vast sea of ice. At the center of the sea of ice is Satan, who is himself encased in ice. Satan is pictured as a fallen angel, so he has wings. Remember: the best can become our worst. His own wings beat endlessly, making an endless icy wind.

As you look out over the sea of ice you see thousands of bumps in the waves. At first you think it is frozen icecaps, but when you look closer, it is not water, but the tops of human heads. These are the prideful people, buried up to their necks in ice.

They are forever separated from one another. Which is to say, while they were living, they were cold to other human beings. While they were living, Pride made them feel free to do anything they wanted. Their pride kept them unbound by the rules, the norms, the human connections of other human beings.

They had no boundaries to their actions: they decided they knew better than anyone else. So they made up their own rules. Now, in the inferno, those who used to be so free are now bound forever. Those who were so cold to others, now have chosen their fate: to be cold and alone forever.

Those who acted as if they were above it all, are beneath the frozen waves, forever isolated and alone in their icy encasement. Pride not only shuts out other people, most of all, pride shuts out God. Pride is too cold for love, too distant for faith.

Those closest to Satan and his beating wings, cry, but their tears immediately freeze, and their prideful tears blind them and stop their emotions. Pride shapes their character to not feel. Pride shapes the human heart to become cold.

So, at this point, I think we are ready for a practical definition.

Pride is:

Person showing extreme arrogance;
a cold contempt for others;
inordinately impressed with their capacities;
they overestimate their own wisdom;
their growing arrogance forms a delusion whereby they lose contact with reality;
convinced that they are superior to other human beings and superior to God, they defy human limits, which is to say, they violate morality, which harms other people, and their own self;
and it ultimately brings about their tragic downfall.

So what is the antidote to pride? All sorts of literature will say: humility. Practice being humble. As in Shakespeare's King Lear: the fool tries to tell the king: "Have more than thou showest; speak less than thou knowest."

Or football coach "Bear" Bryant telling his players, when they scored a touchdown, to act like they had been in the end zone before... that it was no big deal." There is a lot to be said for humility as an antidote to pride. But as Golda Meir said: "Don't be so humble. You're not that great." I think our faith teaches us something more.

If Dante's sea of ice image is taken seriously, the core problem is their distance. Lack of being related. In Luke's gospel, the devil keeps on trying to convince Jesus to do these prideful things that keep him from trusting in God. Make him distant from God. Telling him to trust what is not ultimate.

Faith: trusting what is real. What is most real is God. If pride leads to illusion, then faith leads to reality. Overcoming pride is a matter of faith.

For Jesus, faithfulness is loving God. He draws near to God even in the wilderness. It's always a temptation to live by pride, making a deal with the devil and remaining distant from God and therefore distant from other people.

In this scripture passage, Jesus is urging people to know God. Know the Scripture so that through it, God speaks to you in the wilderness times. Trust in God to provide. Don't try to escape your trials; live through them, and defeat them by faithfulness. Faithfulness to God feeds you, strengthens you, helps you to know who you are.

The temptation is to think we know it all; that we have the answers; that we can escape the discomfort if we just take charge. It ends up in pride. The way forward is faith: God will feed you;

God will care for you; God will be your glory. If you keep God at the forefront, you have an antidote to pride.

It does not have to be about you. It is about the one who created, redeems, and protects you. As our passage from Deuteronomy today shows, you are on the right track, when it's not about the illusion of all the great things you have done for the world; rather it's about celebrating all the good things God has done for all of us.

Have faith.

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