

*The Seven Deadly Sins 7: Pride*

Matthew 23:1-11; Philippians 2:1-11

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Pride may be the most contested of the deadly sins. All the others have at least a negative connotation, but pride is something people slap on the bumpers of their cars. “I’m proud of my honor student!” Pride in your kid, your school, your sports team. Then there’s black pride, gay pride, Latino pride – and white pride too, though we know somehow that’s different from the others even if we’re not really sure why. Our society seems very focused on things like self-esteem. Is pride, then, really a bad thing?

Folks from the underside have said it is not. Women, blacks, gays, and other minority groups have pointed out that calling pride a sin and lifting up humility as a virtue can be a way of keeping people in their place. A racist, sexist society has told some folks that they should not aspire to anything higher: to an education, to decent pay, to better jobs or neighborhoods. That to do so is prideful and sinful, in other words, to forget their “proper place.” I think about that whenever anyone calls Obama elitist. What I hear is, “That uppity n— doesn’t know his place.” Or when folks imply that Sarah Palin’s responsibility should be her family, not public office. She doesn’t know her place. They’re rising above their station, they’re too proud.

I really struggled with that on this sermon. My task has not been to defend any of these sins, but this critique is a very important one that we need to make. I thought I was going to be in trouble until I read Michael Eric Dyson’s book on pride, who in his discussion of black pride pointed out that humility is not the same thing as humiliation. That was the key that unlocked the issue for me. Humility is a spirit that comes from within, implying that people don’t think better of themselves than is deserved – not better, but also not less. Humiliation, on the other hand, comes from outside a person. Humiliation is committed against one person by another.

This concept let me farther a field to search for more enlightenment on this subject of pride. One of the tricky things about the seven “deadlies” is that they were originally written in Greek, and they can be translated in more than one way. Greed or avarice? Anger or wrath? Lust or concupiscence? Pride or vainglory? There are a lot of synonyms for pride: vanity, arrogance, and that old Greek word *hubris*. I decided to look into hubris first – though I have not been able to find if that is the word first used for that sin.

You may recall from your eighth grade reading class that hubris is defiance of the gods or of fate. So Oedipus’ father tried to thwart an evil prophecy that said his son would kill him. His sent his son to grow up far away, but ignorant of his heritage, Oedipus ends up killing his father and marrying his mother. Prophecy fulfilled. Hubris. Translated into a Christian setting, it makes a lot of sense that “defiance of God” would be seen as a deadly sin.

Except that when I read up about it, it turns out that defiance of the gods is only a small part of what hubris meant to the Greeks. Hubris was an actual crime in Athens because it usually resulted in violence against other people. Rape, theft, assault and battery were all considered crimes of hubris. Aristotle said that hubris is about causing shame to a victim for your own gratification. Not shame because they did something wrong; that would be punishment. Not shame because they harmed you; that would be revenge. Rather, shame because you think that putting them down will make you greater. In other words, humiliation. Which, as I said earlier, is not the same as humility.

Psychologists, I learned, have also explored the issue of pride. They have identified two kinds of pride, what they call alpha pride and beta pride. Alpha pride comes from inside yourself and is a sense of inward gratification, as when you meet personal goals that you have set for yourself. Alpha pride has to do with self-esteem, dignity, pride in doing right, in doing well. This is what black pride, gay pride, feminist pride, are all about.

Beta pride, however, is outward focused. It's about getting others to acknowledge your superiority. It does not necessarily come from an over-inflated self-esteem. In fact, it can reflect a low self-esteem that seeks external validation. Beta pride is arrogant, it shows a lack of regard or respect for others.

Now let's return to what modern scholars have said about the ancient Greek concept of hubris. One writer described it as *having energy and power, and misusing it self-indulgently* (Douglas MacDowell). Another defined it as *committing acts of intentional insult which deliberately inflict shame and dishonor on others* (Nick Fisher). A third said it is *excessive self-assertion in the face of others' claims* (Douglas Cairns). Now, that's some high-falutin' language, but the gist here is that hubris is a form of false pride that raises us up by putting others down.

Now let's go back to that black pride, white pride, gay pride, and so forth. In my first sinful sermon, I mentioned Dan Savage, who wrote a book about how he indulged in all seven of the deadlies. For pride, he attended a gay pride parade. While he is gay himself, he doesn't think it's anything to be proud of. Being gay or straight, black or white, male or female – these are not accomplishments we achieved by our own effort. They are accidents of birth. When we talk about gay pride, black pride or whatever, what we're really talking about is the accomplishments we've achieved despite the obstacles set in our path because of race, gender, orientation, physical ability, and so on. It means taking pride in our struggle not to let others humiliate or harm us out of *their* hubris and false pride. In fact, black pride, gay pride, etc. are actually a reflection of humility, an acknowledgement that we couldn't have gotten here without the struggles and sacrifices of others who have gone before us.

White pride, by contrast, is not a term we hear of as often as the others. It refers specifically to groups like the Nazis, the KKK, the Aryan Nation. White pride is the belief that whites are superior, that they got where they are because they're better than others, that they deserve the higher place and that others need to give way to them. And if others don't give way, then whites will put them in their place. This is not true pride. This is hubris, plain and simple. It's not that white people – or men – or straights – can't be proud. But that what we have to be proud of is our efforts to help our fellow human beings, to care for one another, to fight for each other's dignity and rights. All of us can be proud of that, and such pride is not a deadly sin.

Getting back to the Bible, this is exactly, *exactly*, what Jesus is all about. When he warns his disciples about the Pharisees, he's criticizing them for their hubris. "They do all their deeds so that others will see. They love the place of honor at feasts and best seats in the synagogue." They think to make themselves great by putting others down. The cure for this deadly pride, Jesus says, is humility. But notice how he taps into our alpha pride, the good pride. If you want to be great, he says, there is nothing wrong with that. But the way to greatness is by serving others. Raise others up. Work for their good. This is true greatness. This is something we can genuinely be proud of.

Paul continues the theme in his letter to the Philippians. As is often the case in churches, the Philippians had begun to get into squabbles and fights, no doubt over who was the greatest. Do nothing from selfishness and conceit, Paul warns – in other words, do nothing out of hubris. Rather in humility count others better than yourself. But this isn't false humility either, which can be just as bad, a false abasement that represses yourself is just as bad as a false abasement that represses

others. Rather, Paul says, look *not only* to your own interests *but also* to the interests of others. None of us will get ahead unless all of us get ahead.

He then goes into what Bible scholars say was one of the earliest hymns of the church, and it is a beautiful one that's all about the kind of humility we can be proud of. Here was Jesus, the hymn says, who was equal to God. But he didn't see his divinity as something to cling to, a hubris that kept him as God at the expense of human suffering. Jesus saw how we were enchained by sin – like lust, greed, sloth, envy, and so on – but rather than saying, “Thank goodness I'm not one of them!” instead Jesus humbled himself, came down to our level, became one with us and shared in our sufferings, even to the point of death itself, death on a cross, the most humiliating form of execution in the Roman Empire. And why did he do all this? To show how much better he is than us? Or was it just idle curiosity because it had been a boring day in heaven? No! He did all this so that we might be free. So that when he would be vindicated, lifted up, exalted, resurrected, then all of us would be raised up too. He didn't push us down to make himself look greater. Rather, he gave up his own privilege in order that we all might be greater.