

“Pride” by Rev. Cameron D. St. Michael

Almighty God, bless the hearing and reading of your Word. Let the Holy Spirit descend upon us, that we may understand your Word for us today. As your scriptures are read, as your Word is heard, let the utterances of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sights, O Lord. By your Holy Spirit in your Holy Church and let God’s people say – Amen.

Our scripture reading for today comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter eighteen, verses nine through fourteen. Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: “Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.” This is the word of God, to the people of God, thanks be to God.

This Sunday starts a series that’s going to be a little bit longer than the usual series I’ve done. We’re going to be spending this Sunday and the next six talking about the Seven Deadly Sins. They seem to be in a lot of places, just not often in the church that we talk about them. They’re in pop culture and they make it into music, movies, TV shows, but I don’t know that we take a whole lot of time to understand why these are considered “deadly sins.” And I think sometimes we get some wrong ideas about them, and we get confused because they’re not very precise. And I wanted to start with pride because I think that all the other sins stem from pride, that pride is the gateway to all the other problems, and it’s because of the way pride works. One of the things we have to address though is whether or not all pride is bad, and my answer to that is *no*.

There are times that it’s good to have pride. Without pride, most of us wouldn’t do the things that we do, but there’s a balance that we have to find. I know that I’m proud of my

children, that when they do nice things and they help each other and they follow directions, I'm so proud of them. And I'm proud of the churches that I've served, all the good that you guys do and all the wonderful things you do, and I'm proud of that. But one of the things is that pride has a way of blinding us because pride starts to take over. But I can be proud of my kids, but if my pride makes me blind to the bad things that they're doing, and I don't correct them, they're going to keep doing those things because I'm too proud to admit that they had a problem. And the same happens that if I'm proud of you that I don't encourage you to do more, and don't push you to keep going. And the same thing happens when we find pride in our own works.

pride starts as something good; I have pride in the work that I do, and if I didn't have any pride as a pastor, I wouldn't stay one because I'd have no reason to because I would be sad about my work; but I am proud. But the problem is that when we're proud of something, sometimes that keeps growing, and it keeps growing, and it keeps growing, to the point that we suddenly feel like maybe we're better. Maybe we're so proud of the job that we do we think "nobody can do it as well as I do it. And nobody can and anybody who thinks they can correct me, well, they must be wrong, because I know what a good job I'm doing." It's a thing that causes us to lie. Rather than face our failings, it's easier to tell a lie about them. But if I said I was going to be somewhere, I could say "Oh, well, things came up, and you know, I never said I would definitely be there, I just said I wanted to make it, but I'm so busy these days, I have to fit it into my schedule, and you know, I'm just so busy doing all these things." And we build ourselves up in our failings, and sometimes, it's that we have told an outright lie, so we tell another one to build on it, too proud to admit we made a mistake. pride is also the thing that gives us some of the worst problems that we see, because racism starts simply as pride.

Somebody has pride in their race and that pride quickly becomes that they're in the best race, and then they're in the best race because it's better than all the others and that all the others are inferior, and all others should bow down before the best. The same thing happens with just about anything we have pride in. Unchecked, it can run rampant and can become something bad. And this applies to God as well.

It's funny to think that we could say you could have too much pride in God. But it's what causes some of our greatest divisions, that if I say that I am such a proud man of God, I serve a

God that is true and faithful and the God that I serve is better than the one anybody else serves, that the God that I envision is the best. And suddenly, that pride gets warped into God being what we want God to be, and that it's our God, and soon it becomes about how much we serve God, how much we love him, and suddenly we're worshipping ourselves. And so, the question is, "Then how do you keep pride in check? How do we keep from having all of these things happen? How can we have good pride?" And that is to keep it in balance.

I am proud of my kids, but I know that I have to keep instructing them, so they'll keep learning, and I have to keep helping them so that they will grow to be even better than I can imagine, which means that I have to correct them and that I have to discipline them. I am proud of my congregations, but I know that if I don't continually push you guys and help you and instruct you and learn from you, that we will grow stagnant. We will be lukewarm and won't be of help to anybody. And importantly, I have pride in the things I do. I am proud to do the work that I do, and I'm humbled to be able to do it. I am proud to be able to serve God and humbled to be in His presence. I am proud and humbled, and it's that balance, because when you have that humility to go with it, we remember that we can be proud, but we restrain ourselves. And it's important that we remember this, because when pride goes unchecked, we lift ourselves up and we swell up, and suddenly, we are like that Pharisee.

The thing is, that Pharisee was doing good things. When he talked about fasting, fasting contains good things. When he talked about giving, giving can be a good thing, but he wasn't concerned with why. He was concerned about the recognition. He wasn't doing it for God, he was doing it that others would see it, because his pride had gotten in the way of his faith. Now on the other hand, if instead of saying that he didn't want to be like all the others, if he had gone up and said, "Lord, I thank you for what you have given me, and I am humbled to be in your presence. Thank you for giving me the opportunity that I may give, and I am humbled that you accept what I have offered. Thank you for allowing me to fast and I pray that you will strengthen me that I can do more in your service." And maybe more importantly, he needed to recognize himself the way that tax collector did. "Lord, see me, a sinner, someone undeserving, someone others look down upon that I look down upon myself. See me, a sinner, and help me."

I have yet to meet someone who is not a sinner, and I am included in that bunch. I don't know that I ever will in this lifetime. What we get from that tax collector is something important, though. He sees who he is, he recognizes his failings, and he hands them over to God, faithful that God can make something better. We have to find that balance between our pride and our humility or our pride will cause us to fall, because no matter how much we lift ourselves up, we are going to knock ourselves over. Instead of saying that he was happy he wasn't that tax collector, maybe that Pharisee could've found a little balance by saying, "Lord, I know that though I am a Pharisee, I sin just as that tax collector does. Lord, help me to help him. Help me to help myself. And help me to help the world." We often create an "other," just as the Pharisee did, somebody who's lesser, somebody who is undeserving, somebody that we can look down upon and that we can feel that we are in a higher place.

Pride has a long history in the church itself, and that's a hard thing to hear sometimes, because often that pride becomes, "Well I'm a member of the church and I'm saved and thank God for that because I'm not like all those people who are out there who aren't saved." Because people hear that. People hear that and the first thing they think is, "Who are these people? Who are these people that hold themselves up thinking they made themselves righteous?" And we push people out because of our pride.

Pride is dangerous because it happens so easily, and it becomes so pervasive that when our pride grows out of control, suddenly our pride grows into something that we cannot control. pride may start out as something simple, but it grows. That you may have pride in who you are, but that may grow into pride into who you are not, and that pride turns into disgust. And suddenly, you're disgusted at other people, and now that you're disgusted with them, you get angry towards them, and after you get angry, you get hateful. And now that you're hateful, you become violent. And even if it's just in thought, even if it's just in speech, it is more violent than we should ever carry in our hearts. I may stand up here, but I know that I am no better than anybody that I come across, because we are all God's children.

We find a balance by making sure we humble ourselves before each other, that we readily admit our mistakes to each other, that when we wrong someone, we go, and we make it right because we admit that we made a mistake. That when we hurt someone's feelings, even if

it is unintentional, we go, and we apologize, even if it's saying that, "I didn't know what I said was hurtful, but I understand that it was, and I'm sorry, because that was wrong on my part." We invite people in. So, you know what? I serve a risen savior, and I know that if he welcomes even me, that everyone must be welcome in his house. We acknowledge our own failings so that others may build us up, because I believe in each and every one of you. I believe that through God, all things are possible and that He can lift all of you up, that he can make all of you something beautiful that I can't even imagine. That we can be perfected in God's love and with God's help, and only by God's grace. That it is a gift that we accept, it is nothing that we have earned, that we have no reason to stand up with pride, that we have earned God's grace because there is nothing we could have done to earn it, but I am humbled that he has offered it freely. We don't come here to justify ourselves, we come here that God may justify us. We don't come here that we may pray ourselves into Heaven, but that we may pray to bring a world to salvation, that we have faith that God will get us there. We keep our pride in check with our humility, knowing that we let ourselves be humbled. God will have pride in us.

Keep your hearts in check. Remember that we are all here together. Before you go and start seeking out the splinters in the eyes of your neighbors, remember to check yourself for any logs jutting out of your own, and then be thankful. Thankful that God has given you a chance to recognize a failing in yourself so that you may seek out others to help you with that failing. That we may use our gifts freely to help one another, that we humble ourselves so that we may grow together, because God put us here that we may build His kingdom together, that we may make disciples of Jesus Christ together, that together we will transform the world in His love and in His mercy. And it is only by His grace that we do this. Be proud and be humble, that you may serve graciously and lovingly, and that you may love more completely with a humbled heart. Amen.