



# The Seven Deadly Sins (and Their Corresponding Virtues)

## SESSION 7—PRIDE AND HUMILITY

*What is pride, and why is it a problem? What is humility, and why should we want to embody it?*

### Introduction

“Pride goes . . . before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29).

Such sayings about pride and humility are among the most familiar in the Bible. From Old Testament times through the era of Jesus and the apostles and down through Christian history, pride and humility have been perhaps the most-discussed vice-and-virtue pair. (See the text boxes.)

In today’s culture, though, talking about humility is liable to get you looked at funny. It may be the spiritual quality least appreciated in our time. Psychology has taught us the importance of self-esteem, and working life often teaches us the value of self-promotion. In popular culture, humility is treated more like a deadly sin than a virtue.

Humility today seems like a curiosity, something exotic from another time and place, like an Amish buggy on an interstate. Yet we can’t ignore the prophets and sages, not to mention Jesus himself, who have valued humility and pride in ways that turn our culture’s assessment on its head.

### What’s the Matter with Pride?

Parents are proud of their children. Patriots are proud of their countries. People want to take pride in their work.



The problem with pride, then, is that it is wrapped up in our alienation from our true identity in God. We build ourselves up in order to stand out, to be recognized and approved, because, at bottom, we are afraid that otherwise there will be nothing there.

What’s the problem, then? Why can’t we take pride in who we are and what we do?

That way of asking the question gets at the heart of the matter. Pride has to do with *who we are*, and with our feelings about who we are.

The first thing to consider is that pride is not the same as *happiness*. We can be happy to be who we are, happy to do what we do, happy with our family, happy with our church, without falling into pride. This kind of happiness is related to the self-esteem that we value as part of being psychologically healthy people.

In spiritual terms, this happiness is related to our nature as creatures: God creates each individual being with its own reality that is good. As human beings, we are each made in the image of God, an infinite image present in us in an infinite number of individual personalities and characters. To rejoice in being who God has made us is not pride, but a spiritually sound recognition that we are creatures of God, on whom we rely for our existence and our reality. As William S. Stafford remarks, “For a

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For you deliver a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down. (Ps. 18:27)

Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favor. (Prov. 3:34)

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud. (Prov. 16:18–19)

The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the LORD alone will be exalted on that day. (Isa. 2:17)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:8)

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matt. 11:29)

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 14:11)

And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” [Prov. 3:34]. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. (1 Pet. 5:5b–6)

humanity lurching between accidie [spiritual sloth] and pride, it is sometimes difficult to understand the right joy of created beings in God and thus their right joy in their own existence.”<sup>1</sup>

### What *Is* the Matter with Pride?

It is not pride to feel that we are as God has made us, meaning that we are as we ought to be. Pride enters in when we project this sense of the rightness of our lives onto others in order to receive their acknowledgment or

approval. It also enters in when we need to feel that our lives are better than those of others.

### External Pride

Pride has to do with demonstrating our value to other people. What we are actually doing, nearly every time we do this, is demonstrating our value to ourselves. Pride is likely to develop from too little self-esteem (in the sense outlined above) rather than too much. We doubt our own value and want other people to affirm it, so we proudly trumpet our worthiness.

We tend to construct our sense of identity not on the basis of who we are in the sight of our Creator, but on the basis of who we imagine we want to be, which is mainly who we think other people want us to be. Thomas Merton speaks of having the choice between being real, cooperating with God’s creation of our identity as it really is, and being unreal, constructing a “false self,” the person we think we want to be. “My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion.” To create this false self and convince myself of my own reality, I put on masks and “wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Pride, as it relates to other people, grows out of this false, self-constructed self. People with genuine self-esteem, grounded in the recognition of their identity as the image of God, don’t need to have their worth constantly affirmed through the approval of other people. Most of us most of the time, however, are looking for that acceptance and approval, and the obvious way to get it is to elevate the things we have and the self we are pretending to be above what we think of as our competition. We elevate our family for our neighbors, our work for our coworkers, our country for our fellow citizens, our religion for our fellow believers, lifting them above the people and parties and enemies and sects who are devalued or despised by our group. Appropriate recognition of the goodness of God’s gifts turns into pride almost before we notice it.

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approved, because, at bottom, we are afraid that otherwise there will be nothing there. Not trusting the reality of our inmost selves, not relying on our Creator to provide us with our essential truth and identity, we go for pride instead, and the more pride we can pile onto

our selves, the less we consider who we might really be behind the mask.

## Internal Pride

Pride also shows up as an internal characteristic, a sense of our own superiority in and of itself. The roots are much the same: we not only put on masks to gain approval from others, we wear masks even for ourselves, to build up a sense of identity that we can recognize and enjoy. We do this without reference to (perhaps even in fear of) the identity given us by God.

Clearly this kind of pride is damaging to our relationship with God. "Pride turns to self, away from God. Pride insists on being its own light. . . . On the brink

## PRIDE AND HUMILITY IN CHRISTIAN TEACHING

An old man was asked, "How does the soul acquire humility?" And he answered, "When it is anxious about its own faults alone." (The Desert Fathers)

As salt is to all kinds of food, so is humility to all kinds of virtues. (Isaac of Nineveh)

What a person is in the eyes of God, so much he is, and no more. (Francis of Assisi)

More than anything else, it is the loving contemplation of its Maker that causes the soul to realize its own insignificance, and fills it with holy fear and true humility, and with abundant love to our fellow Christians. (Julian of Norwich)

Humility is an indispensable requisite of true prayer. . . . Humility must be in the praying character as light is in the sun. Prayer has no beginning, no ending, no being, without humility. . . . Humility is born by looking at God, and His holiness, and then looking at self and man's unholiness. (Edward M. Bounds)

Humility . . . is said both by its upholders and opponents to be the peculiar growth of Christianity. . . . The essence of Christianity was . . . a covenant with God which opened to men a clear deliverance. They thought themselves secure; . . . and immediately they discovered humility. . . . It is always the secure who are humble. (G. K. Chesterton)

In thinking oneself above some other soul, one thinks oneself something and therefore one lacks the humility due to God, which is to recognise our own nothingness. Whereas if one does not esteem anything in oneself but recognises a grace as coming from the mercy of God one is not lacking in humility, nor in justice, for one attributes nothing to oneself. . . . We should never look except at God and ourselves and only concern ourselves with our neighbour to render him service. (Raïssa Maritain)

Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves. *But a man who is truly humble cannot despair, because in the humble man there is no longer any such thing as self-pity.* (Thomas Merton)

The . . . "humility" shown by Jesus and the majority of primitive Christianity . . . is not a virtue of subjects, but denotes the solidarity of the humiliated. . . . The humiliated and oppressed can acknowledge their own identity; they need not orientate themselves on prevailing standards—which are the standards of the rulers—but practise a life in solidarity. . . . It is important for those who are not numbered among the humiliated to learn and practise humility as solidarity with the humiliated. (Klaus Wengst)

between the abyss of God and the abyss of non-being, . . . pride asserts divine absoluteness for itself."<sup>3</sup> In its most extreme form, it can lead us to deny relationship with God altogether, and to assert our lack of need for God, or even God's complete nonexistence. Atheism denies that we are creatures, and nothing is more closely linked to pride than that.

We can only be proudly convinced of our superiority if we constantly compare ourselves with other people (even if we never say a word about it to them) and deny the reality of our flaws. Once we begin to live as our real selves, given by God and not created as a showpiece to impress others, we can acknowledge our flaws—the places where we are still growing into our God-given reality—without fear or denial. As our real selves we have no pride, because we know that our reality is a gift and not something we have achieved on our own. We quit comparing ourselves with others, because we no longer care if our self, our reality, is better than anyone else's. And this brings us to humility.

## Humility: Getting Real

If pride develops from a false sense of self, rooted in a denial of our actual reality, then humility must involve an acceptance of that God-given self. *Humility does not mean thinking of ourselves as worthless.* It means acknowledging that we are uniquely made in the image of God, no more and no less.

Humility does not mean considering ourselves worse than other people rather than better. It does not even mean making a realistic evaluation of ourselves. Humility has nothing to do with self-evaluation. That is because evaluation implies comparison with a standard, and humility means giving up comparison altogether. No humble person is concerned with how he or she compares with other people. Humility brings about an utter loss of interest in this subject, and thus humility does not mean considering ourselves either better or worse than others.

Humility results from knowing ourselves in relation to God. It arises from an awareness of ourselves as creatures, as finite beings before the infinite and loving God who gives us our existence. Out of this consciousness no pride can flow; comparison with this standard would be worse than ridiculous. Our individual characteristics

are not an issue either. We are simply what everything else is that is not God. In the presence of the Creator, we worship, we give thanks, and we are humble.

In a similar way, humility arises from our awareness of Christ as both redeemer and model. Since we know that our standing before God is not of our own making or earning, but is freely given to us in Jesus, "boasting," as Paul writes, "is excluded" (Rom. 3:27). Both the teaching of Jesus on humility and our knowledge of him as the divine Word who humbly entered into human flesh provide us with a pattern and an incentive toward humility.

This is the root of humility, an awareness of ourselves as creatures among other creatures, with no standing but that of grace. Its branches extend outward from this awareness into all of our relationships. Once we have recognized the immensity of divine love and mercy and the absolute difference between creature and Creator, the distinctions between one creature and another lose their significance. Without this sense of differences to be evaluated to rank one person above another, we no longer try to rate ourselves by reference to other people. We accept our selves and their worth simply as given by God, and we regard everyone else in the same way. Awareness of God and of life, both in this world and the next, as a pure gift from God is a great leveler.

## Humility: Onward and Downward

Benedict, in chapter 7 of his *Rule*, speaks of the paradoxical nature of humility. He compares it to Jacob's vision of the ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending (Gen. 28:10–22). "Without a doubt," Benedict writes, "this ascent and descent can signify only that we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility." Benedict lists twelve steps on the ladder of humility, most of them related directly to monastic life. Yet they can apply to us as well, since they have to do with not clinging to our own will and desires, our own self-image and self-assertion. Consider the first and the twelfth steps: first to have reverence for God and awareness of God before our eyes at all times; and last to manifest humility in everything we do, whether at prayer or at work, at home or on the road.<sup>4</sup>

We climb to heaven by lowering ourselves on earth; if we try to boost ourselves up on earth, we only lower ourselves further from heaven. From Jesus to Paul to the desert saints to Benedict to Francis of Assisi to the Amish to Mother Teresa, the Christian tradition has consistently made this claim. Our culture makes humility hard, but no harder than in the honor-obsessed Roman world of Jesus and Paul, or the wild and woolly Middle Ages of Benedict and Francis. It could be that the church's mission in our times includes taking up again the challenging tools of humility, and constructing before a puzzled world this ladder that no one can climb except by going down.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. William S. Stafford, *Disordered Loves: Healing the Seven Deadly Sins* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1994), 119.
2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 32–34; quotations, 34 and 35.
3. Stafford, *Disordered Loves*, 120.
4. Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, Vintage Spiritual Classics (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 16–20; quotation, 16.