

### ***The Seven Deadly Sins: Pride***

In the name of him who humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten evening meditations this year we have been reviewing what are known as the Seven Deadly Sins. And thus so far we have considered gluttony, the selfish tendency we have to consume more food and other resources than is necessary or wise; and wrath, that sinful, inappropriate, and quick to boil over anger that so often emerges in us – and that dissipates so slowly (if at all). We looked at lust, which is the source of many of our sexual sins; and avarice or greed, which is our insatiable appetite to amass to ourselves ever more wealth and quantities of goods. We studied envy, which we found was not just wanting for ourselves the good fortune that falls to others, but even more, it's begrudging that good fortune to others and being resentful of those who get it. And then last week we considered the sin of sloth or laziness; and we saw that it's not just that inclination we have to avoid physical labor (though that's a big part of it), but it also includes our mental sloth, that reluctance we have to think hard, learn, and use our brains; and even more seriously, it includes our spiritual laziness, which causes us to avoid the disciplines of worship, Bible study, meditation, and prayer. We've considered these sins, and we've seen that we are guilty of all them; and just as importantly we've seen why they are to be despised, and why indeed they are called deadly – for they separate us from life with the one true and holy God.

This evening we come to the one sin that we have yet to consider – the one I very deliberately held to last, even though it's almost always named first on the list of Deadly Seven. And well it should be because in one way or another it's what underlies them all. I speak of the sin of pride. Simply stated, pride is the sin of having an excessively high opinion of oneself; it's an inflated sense of one's value, ability, morality, status, or dignity. It's the self aggrandizement that shows up outwardly in the behaviors we call conceit and arrogance; but those are only the flowers of the twisting vine of pride that has its roots sunk deep in every one of our hearts. Most of us know enough not to let the flowers open so that they can readily be seen by others. We hate arrogance in others – mostly because it offends our own sense of pride: "How dare that person think he's better than me!" (Which only proves I think *I'm* better – that's why I'm offended.) And so, generally speaking, we have the good sense to suppress our own outward signs of pride—but it's always there: that sense we all have that "I am the center of the universe and everything revolves around me."

Now, as Christians, we know this is not true. We understand that in truth the Lord is the center of the universe and that everything really revolves around him. And from this it can be plainly seen what pride is. It is, first and foremost, self idolatry. We place ourselves in the center and shove the Lord out, effectively declaring ourselves to be God. And very poor gods and goddesses we make. Selfish, self absorbed, narcissistic – filled with the desire to be served rather than to serve. Can you imagine what the universe would be like if one of us really were the god and designer of it? Sure, if you were the god of your own creation, you might like the way it came out. The question is would anyone else? Or would everything else exist merely to serve you and stroke your ego?

In this the wisdom and infinite love of the one true God is revealed. He didn't create all things for his benefit. He has no needs. He didn't have to make anything. So, why did he do it? He made it all for us. And he didn't create us so that we could serve him as his slaves; rather he created us because he delights in sharing his goodness with those he makes his children. As a parent he delights in giving to his children; he finds joy in serving them. It's his

very nature to serve and to love the people he created—never for his own benefit, but always only for our sakes.

And that's the way he made his perfect creation. It was a reflection of his own loving and serving character. Specifically mankind, our first parents, were made in his image. They were made so that they delighted in serving and loving each other without any selfish thoughts of what the other might do for them. And they were given the task of ruling over the creation, not as despots and lords, but as faithful servants. The highest of the physical creatures, man, was to care for the other creatures – acting as the Lord's steward and reaping the benefits, enjoying the fruits of the creation. That was the perfect world.

We know too that the Lord created an order of spiritual beings, the angels, lesser than himself by far, but far greater in power and in other ways than mankind. And in the Lord's way of doing business, the task of the angels was to serve man. As always, the greater being serving the lesser – reflecting the Lord's own image. The archangel Lucifer, whose name means "bearer of light" was given particular charge of guarding and protecting our first parents in the Garden of God. It was a position of high honor – the highest of honors from the Lord's point of view – that Lucifer should be chosen to serve mankind in this capacity. And he was given corresponding majesty, beauty, and glory.

But as the reading from Ezekiel we heard earlier makes clear, Lucifer balked at the task he had been given. His heart became proud, we are told. It means that he enjoyed the glory the Lord gave him, but didn't much care for his assigned role. "Why should I, the greater being, serve the likes of mankind? I'm stronger. I'm better. I'm wiser. It should be the other way around. The universe, the way the Lord made it, is upside down, which means the Lord made it wrong. And I know just what to do to set things right so that all things serve me."

And so, it happened that Lucifer, whose job it was to guard and serve mankind for the Lord, instead murdered mankind by luring our first parents into sin. So doing, he recast creation the way he wanted it to be – an image of himself in which all was a bitter struggle for honor, glory, and power at the expense of others. A creation in which the weak serve the strong because they must – and in which everyone is deluded into thinking that's the way things ought to be. This is the slavery of sin. And we too are infected with this way of thinking. It's the devil's design. And because we believe it, we prove that we are his children, born of his corrupt seed. And we are, therefore, subject to the same fate as the devil – fit only to be cast away from God's holy presence and burned eternally in the fire of hell.

But, as you know, the Lord God had a plan to redeem fallen men. It was a plan that coincided perfectly with his character to love and to serve the creatures he made. We heard about this in the reading from Philippians, how Jesus Christ, though he is by nature perfect God, yet for our sakes took on the flesh of fallen man, and made himself subject to illness, pain, suffering – all the aches and sorrows we know in this life; and how he humbled himself by taking on not just our flesh, but also the penalty of our sins – all the wrath and punishment we rightly deserve – carrying them to the cross and dying the most horrible and humiliating death imaginable. All this to save us. To redeem us. To make us the righteous children of God once again.

And we see Jesus trying to readjust and correct his disciples' thinking in the upper room even at the last, just hours before his arrest and entry into his passion. For three years he'd been trying to get the message across to them – that the problem with this world, more than anything, is the sin of pride. And so he graphically illustrates for them the way things ought to be among God's children, as Jesus, though their Lord and master, serves his disciples. We

know that he began by washing their feet – a job considered beneath the dignity of slaves. Then we see him acting as their host at the Passover meal, serving them the food and wine – and so much more than these, for here he institutes the Sacrament by which he will continue to serve his disciples for the entire Church age by feeding them with his body and blood – the body and blood he was about to surrender on the cross—as he repeatedly told them he must.

But do imagine for a moment that they got it? Not even close. As incredible as it seems, as Jesus talks to them about suffering and giving and serving and loving one another, we read that the disciples, hearing all this (or rather, choosing not to hear it) launch into a heated discussion about which of them is the greatest. I can't imagine how frustrating that must have been for our Lord. It would make me want to grab them all, shake them violently, and say, "Have you understood *nothing* I've been telling you?" Instead, with infinite patience, Jesus repeats the lesson again. "The kings of the nations exercise lordship ... but not so with you. Rather let the greatest among you become as the least, and the leader as one who serves. Look at me. You call me Lord and Master. And so I am. But yet I am among you as the one who serves." Little did they know at the time just how much and to what great lengths Jesus was about to go to serve them.

But we do. We know exactly what was about to unfold: the hours of agonizing prayer in Gethsemane, the arrest, the beatings, the whippings, the spitting, mockery, and humiliation, the nailing, the six hours of excruciating torture on the cross. And so it would be nice to think that maybe, just maybe, we've learned the lesson that Jesus was trying so hard to teach them. Wouldn't it though?

But that's not the way it is, is it? Still, even among us, after all we've seen and heard and know to be true, it's still a struggle to be counted the greatest, to have others look up to and admire us, to have a fine reputation; to not be like those other people we could all name, those people whom, for whatever reason, we count ourselves better than and whom we wouldn't care to serve even if our lives depended upon it. "You got to be kidding. Me? Serve them? No way. I'd rather be damned first."

That sentiment, my friends, which we all have with respect to at least someone, is spot on – because that sentiment is precisely what causes us to be damned. It is the exact opposite of a Christ-like attitude. It's proof that we are the devil's seed – that we are just like him and that we therefore richly deserve his same fate.

And this is why, above all the other deadly sins, we must daily examine our hearts for the pride that so freely and forcefully wells up within. You must see it for what it is so that you learn to hate it, confess it, and desire to turn from it so that it dies. And then, hearing again the life-giving word of forgiveness from Christ our Lord, he will raise you up with him to a new and nobler life – a life as God's child, reflecting the virtues of our heavenly Father, showing real Christian love, and gladly and willingly serving others just as Christ serves you—as he continues to serve you by cleaning up our messes, fixing what you break, paying the debts you rack up, and taking upon himself the punishment you deserve.

It's his doing all this to serve us that makes him the greatest in God's kingdom. Let us therefore gladly take up our crosses and make it our goal to be like him in his humility and willing service for others that we too may be great in God's kingdom and show ourselves to be children of our Father in heaven. For that is what we are in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***