

Recycling Pride
Mark 10:35-45

Brothers and sisters, I'm sure you would agree with me that nobody wants a friend, or even an acquaintance, who is beset with pride, or envy, or greed, or gluttony, or sloth, or lust, or anger.

These are not attractive interpersonal qualities; they cause relationship problems, they drive people away.

Everyone knows how difficult and miserable it can be when one of your friends, or family members, or a colleague, a classmate, a fellow church member... or even ourselves are beset by one of these seven characteristics.

The truth is that each of us is beset with at least one - if not more - of these seven deadly sins.

That is to say even though we are all guilty of having been proud at certain times, for some of us it is truly hard to be humble when you're as great as you are.

Or even though we're all guilty of occasionally losing our temper, for some of us that anger is constantly simmering just below the surface.

And it's true that we all need of a motivational kick-in-the pants to do the right thing from time to time, but for some of us – well we're too lazy – too slothful – to get around to it.

Brothers and sisters, each of us has a tendency towards least one of these seven deadly sins – and it continually trips us up and we fall into it; over and over, again and again.

Even when we know better, even when we wish we wouldn't. And time and time again we find ourselves going to back Jesus and asking forgiveness for our Greed, for Lust, for Envy and so on.

Now – the good news, unbelievable news really, is that Christ's forgiveness is there for us every time; it never runs out! Christ paid for ALL our sins – past, present and future... Amen!

And there is more good news – in addition to forgiving all those specific instances of anger or pride or gluttony, that occur over and over and over again and again... Jesus Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to change us, transform us because as we learned last week, Sin is not just the specific instances of doing something wrong...

At a more deeper and fundamental level Sin is a state of being that we are born into... and it causes everything which God created good to be twisted and warped.

So while our specific sins are forgiven and that is great, we all need the work of the Holy Spirit to change our state of being and undo the more deep pervasive warping and twisting effects that Sin has on the essence of who we are - this is what Paul is speaking about in Philippians 1:6 *“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

This is the process of being sanctified, of being made more like Jesus, in every aspect of what it means to be human.

Or to use a metaphor that we might better understand; our Sinful state of being is being recycled into Jesus’ humanity.

Just as recycling takes something that is old and worn out, or damaged, or twisted and warped and it shreds it, melts it down – burns away all the impurities and then creates something new out of it...

So to the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives doing the same thing with us. Even though we are affected by Sin and we are under its curse and effects – God does not throw us away, He recycles us – He makes us new again.

Thus Paul explains in Ephesians 4:22 *“put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

And we are expected to co-operate with the Holy Spirit as He works on us, in us, in this regard – as Paul says in Gal 5:25 *“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”*

Now, the early Christians developed a tool to assist believers in co-operating with the Holy Spirit's transforming work.

Around 350 A.D. a monk named Evagrius, who lived in the Egyptian desert, drafted a list of eight impure thoughts to be used in the daily examining of one's mind and heart.

Eventually this list made its way to Rome, and in 590ish A.D. Pope Gregory the Great modified the list to seven and identified "Pride" as the root sin of the other six, and from there on they became known as "the Seven Deadly Sins."

And it's because these seven particular sins lead to so many other sins that they are considered to be deadly. It's not the case, as some have been mistakenly taught, that committing a "deadly sin" is worse than other kinds of sins and somehow puts your standing with God at risk.

Rather the fact that the Seven Deadly Sins act as "gateway" sins reminds us that even though we may not have murdered anyone, or committed adultery, or robbed a bank - Sin still

affects us in ways which has the potential to give manifestation to those other sinful actions.

As Jesus reminded the ever-so upstanding and morally impeccable Pharisees in Matt 5:21, 27 - Anger lies at the root of murder, and Lust lies behind the sin of adultery.

And it is Pride that lies behind their self-righteousness.

It is Pride that causes us to refuse to acknowledge that Sin is a state of being, Sin affects the very core of who we are – and makes us Sinners who are in need of salvation - even if we are normal morally upstanding good people.

This is why Pride is the root of the Seven deadly Sins, and unless we deal with Pride first – we will not be able to admit that we struggle with any of the other six deadly sins and we'll miss out on the sanctifying/recycling work that the Holy Spirit wants to do in those areas of our life.

So Pride is indeed the deadliest of the deadly Sins.

Now – when we think about scriptural examples of struggling with Pride we typically think about the Pharisees, but Jesus’ disciples often struggled with Pride as well.

So let’s look at how this played out in the passage of scripture that we read this morning.

James and John come to Jesus with a request, which is not a bad thing in itself but I don’t know if you noticed the way they approached Jesus?

They come to him and tell him *“We want you.... To do for us... whatever we ask!”* in other words *“Hey Jesus, how about a blank cheque!”*

A little bit arrogant don’t you think? Who do James and John think they are? This kind of request is presumptuous at best if they had made it of a friend or a fellow fisherman...

It’s downright disrespectful to for students to make this kind request from their teacher.. and given the fact that Jesus is

the Messiah, the son of God – to approach Jesus like this... and demand that he agree to give them whatever they want... well it’s the height of self-absorption; it’s the sin of Pride.

But Jesus humors them and responds saying *“so - what do you want me to do for you?”*

And really we shouldn’t be surprised at their request but still it’s so full of self-importance it makes us shake our heads.

“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory...” In other words, make us the two of us the most important and powerful people when you do what you are going to do as the Messiah- ok???

They were probably expecting that Jesus would *“come into his glory”* when he would use his divine power to lead God’s people to victory over the Romans, just like the Judges in the Old Testament - Gideon, Deborah, or better yet... like King David.

Yes, like King David... because the Messiah would rule as King over an era of peace and prosperity that would never end, and all the nations would know Yahweh was the true God and would come to Israel to worship Him – and they thought they were the ideal candidates to be second to the Messiah when this all goes down.

Just a wee bit arrogant. Pride is at work.

And it's not just James and John who are affected by pride. When the rest of the disciples hear about this request the passage says "*they became indignant with them.*" (here is a good example of how pride leads to anger)

The rest of the disciples were upset by James and John's request – who do they think they are asking a question like that – it's inappropriate!

But I'm fairly certain that what really got the rest of the disciples indignant was that James and John's request offended their own sense of pride.

Why them? Why not me – I'm just as good of a candidate as they are, actually I'm a bit better!

Pride is always so easy to see in others friends isn't it?

But... because it tends to catch us when we are at our best, when we are using our strengths and doing what we do well... it's much harder to see when we're being affected by it.

Pride makes us condescending towards others, it causes us to belittle and devalue others, it makes us self-centered and self-absorbed – so we neglect that which others might need from us - like encouragement, praise, complements, time, attention, help...

This is how the sin of pride wrecks relationships and destroys community, and not just between humans – but between ourselves and God as well. Pride sets us up against God.

We're smart, we're pretty intelligent – and so we believe we know better than God what should happen in our lives...

We're creative – and so we believe that we should be admired and praised for what we make...

We're moral – so we believe that we should be able to determine what is right and wrong...

We're made in God's image – so we believe that we should be considered gods – or at least the authority of our own lives.

But pride blinds us to the reality that we're not as good as we think we are, we're not as important, we're not indispensable, we're not infallible... we're not anywhere close to God!

So as Proverbs 16:18 says *"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."*

Inevitably pride leads to some sort of collapse and we come crashing down from our lofty heights. I've certainly been there; done that - I'm sure you've experienced that as well.

And friends the other deadly things about Pride is that when we are struggling with it – it keeps us from reaching out and ask for the help we need to overcome it.

Pride is what makes us figure we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and do a better job next, do it right next time, and refuse to admit that Sin has warped and twisted us in a way that only the Holy Spirit's sanctification can undo...

It keeps us from experiencing the healing power that Christian community can offer us because we won't admit our Sin, our pride to each other.

But James 5:16 says *"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."*

And in our scripture reading this morning we can see that pride is preventing the disciples from doing any of this, so Jesus needs to step in and deal with the situation.

He gathers them together and teaches them a different way, a path away from pride.

And really friends, all throughout this passage of scripture Jesus is the prime example of someone who could be proud but isn't.

Jesus could have been flattered that James and John had made such a request from him, while it was arrogant to ask in such a way, it still shows Jesus is the one who can make the decision and they have to come to him to ask...

But Jesus responded – *“that’s not my decision to make... God the Father has already determined who will be in those positions.”* So Jesus doesn't set himself up against God.

And that's a good example, but there is more to it than that. When Jesus rebukes his disciples about their pride he identifies what the problem is.

The disciples are taking their inspiration from the Gentile rulers – their Roman overlords, Caesar and his Generals, the provincial governors like Pontius Pilate...

That's ironic isn't it – the very leaders whom the disciples hope Jesus will defeat and free them from... they are the ones whom the disciples are inspired by.

The disciples see how these leaders have become rulers - with all their servants, the ability to command and rule... they see how people seek them out - and they recognize this is power.

They see how these leaders can use their power to make others do their bidding and accomplish their goals.

But friends what we want to pay special attention to here is how Jesus in his response describes the work of sanctification, and how their Pride can be recycled.

Take note that Jesus starts off by saying *“whoever wants to be great!”* He doesn't say *“you should not want to be great!”*

Jesus knows that a number of his disciples are naturally wired with the gifts and talents and disposition and energy which pushes them towards greatness.

We can summarize that characterization and say they are “powerful” people.

That’s part of the unique way that God created them – think of Peter... and especially James and John. They were strong powerful personalities – and because of the parasitical nature of Sin and how it warps and twists that Power which God has created as good - they were especially prone to Pride.

Like the time Jesus and his disciples were snubbed by a Samaritan village in Luke 9:51 - James and John’s pride was so offended they volunteered to call down fire from heaven on Jesus behalf.

And after Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain to witness his transfiguration in Mark 9, there is this little incident afterwards in 9:33-34 *“When [Jesus] was in the*

house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.”

And then right afterwards in vs. 38 John comes to Jesus and says *“Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”*

So it’s not surprising that Jesus had a nickname for these two - He called them Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17) an endearing way to say they were big-talkers, or windbags.

And as Jesus has already instructed them on the necessity of humility, in Mark 9:37, 10:13 – this time Jesus knows it’s pointless to tell them to stop being powerful people because that is how they are created...

So instead Jesus instructs them on how they are to use their power to serve others – as He himself is doing.

And we know this is what Jesus is doing because He speaks about himself using a term of power - “The Son of Man.” He says He did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many!

To be truly great is to use the power that God has created you with to serve others in leadership and not to lord it over them.

And this is exactly what happened in the lives of Peter, James and John after Jesus returned to the Father and sent the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost.

Under the transforming influence of the Holy Spirit, the pride which these three disciples were so prone to - was recycled into Power and they used this Power to serve, as faithful leaders of the early church.

And the good news brothers and sisters is that the Holy Spirit is still at work undoing how Sin warps and twists the various characteristics of who God created us to be.

So, brothers and sisters, while we all get proud from time to time, consider the fact that if pride is something that frequently trips you up.

If you are always struggling with your arrogance, self-centeredness, and presumptuousness, that is an indication that God has created you to be a “Powerful” person.

And instead of continuing to struggle with being humble by trying not to be arrogant, trying not to be self-centered – confess to Jesus that Sin affects you in this way and ask the Holy Spirit to come and do His work of sanctification in you and show you how to recycle this Sin of Pride.

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand how you have been created to be a Powerful person, speak to your fellow Christians it, to your Christ Care Group Leader, to your Pastor – they can give you good feedback on your strengths.

And in this very step – you are already starting to work at building Christian community...

And even though it's not in the bible – Uncle Ben from Spiderman had some good Creational Wisdom for recycling pride into power: With great power comes great responsibility.

Keeping in step with the Holy Spirit to recycle Pride into Power means you look at how you are Powerful and you use it to serve others and build up community.

So who can you protect with your power? Who can you help with your power? Who else can become – or needs to become more powerful - through your power?

2 Tim 1:7 "for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power..."

And when you see what God will accomplish through you, and how he's used you to touch the lives of others in a significant way – ironically... it's a humbling experience.

Friends, when Sin twists our God-given power, we manifest pride, but by the grace of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit that pride can be recycled and an empowering leader can emerge instead...

So brothers and sisters – is God speaking to you about this today? Don't let your pride get in the way. Recycle it!

Let's pray...