

Today we are continuing our journey through Lent by examining the temptations Jesus faced and the temptations which we face. In nearly every single listing of the deadliest sins known to humankind, pride is at the very top of the list. The question I have is this: what’s so darn horrible about a little pride?

What is wrong with feeling good about yourself, and being satisfied with yourself? Aren’t we taught to love our neighbors as ourselves, which means we first have to love ourselves? (Show photo of me in Life Magazine) If you are special and God created you in God’s perfect image, then shouldn’t you be proud of yourself? What is this obsession with pride all about? I can think of several other sins that are far worse than pride, like sloth, gluttony and lust. Why is pride such a big deal? The dictionary describes pride as “...inordinate self-esteem,” “unreasonable conceit,” “an overweening opinion of one’s own abilities.” Pride’s synonyms are not very attractive either—vanity, conceit, arrogance, egotism, self-glorification, boastfulness, a stuck-up snob.” It’s too bad because pride feels good.

While God does want us to love ourselves, and feel good about our accomplishments, I suppose that pride can be dangerous to our souls. Self-worth is healthy, but it is not dependent upon our accomplishments. Pride tends to link our value and worth to our achievements and performance. Pride says we are what we do, we are what we accomplish. God says otherwise.

In *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis called pride a spiritual cancer, but not for the reasons you might assume. Not because pride puffs you up and implies superiority, but because pride has the potential to devour relationships. It has a distancing effect upon others. Lewis says that pride is one of the worst of all of our temptations, because it blocks intimacy, prevents us from becoming truly close to others. It sets you apart and keeps people from getting close. Not only because people aren’t going to want to be around you, but because when you are a proud person, usually you are also too proud to ask for help, too proud to admit you were wrong, too proud to tell someone how much you need them and love them. Pride has the potential to isolate us and separate us from the very people we need so much.

When I think of pride I am always reminded of the Disney movie *The Lion King*. That movie offers a delightful example of Simba’s pride and desire to prove himself better than everyone else. When he sings, *I Just Can’t Wait To Be King*,

he is singing our song:.

“I’m gonna be the main event, like no King was before, I’m brushing up on looking down, working on my roar. No one saying “Do This,” no one saying “Be There,” no one saying “Stop That,” no one saying “See Here,” I just can’t wait to be King. Free to run around all day, Free to do it ALL my way. Everybody look left, everybody look right, everywhere you look I’m standing in the spotlight. Oh I just can’t wait to be King.” That song is our song. Who cannot relate to that song? Who does not dream of coming into their Kingdom someday? When we are young we really do believe we can do or be anything we desire. We all want to stand out and be special, and it can be disappointing when you reach the point in life when you realize you are never going to be king or queen, even of your own little corner of the world, even in your own home!

Jesus had a chance to be a mighty King, and among his temptations in the wilderness, I would guess that the most seductive of all was the temptation of having all of the Kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. He could have been a world ruler, like no King ever before him, even the Greek or Roman Gods. It would have been so easy to give in to that kind of recognition and power. But Jesus knows what an illusion this is. He understands that feeding one’s ego never makes you a better person. It only gives you a bigger ego, and makes you want to prove yourself better than others again and again. He knows that as a mighty King he would be far removed from others and not touch them in such a profound and personal way. He knows that earthly power would diminish the quality of his relationships and the lasting power of his message. He will draw far more people to him through gentleness, humility, meekness.

Jesus tells an incredibly powerful story in the 18th chapter of Luke about how dangerous pride can be. Here are two men who go to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee, no doubt a wise, accomplished, and faithful man, launches into a proud prayer at the expense of others. He is lifting himself up by putting others down. He says, “Thank you God that I am not like these other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or like this tax man here. I fast and tithe on all of my income. Aren’t I wonderful? Don’t you just love me, God? I love me too.”

He is starkly contrasted with a tax collector, standing far away and humbled to the depths of his being. He really doesn’t care about anyone else, he knows how much he needs help. He cannot even look up to God, but beats his breast and says, “God, please have mercy upon me, a sinner.” The Pharisee cannot be helped, because he doesn’t even know he needs help. He is so full of himself that none of God’s grace could possibly enter in. But the tax collector is an empty vessel, he is

broken and contrite, ready to receive God's redeeming love. His heart is pained, he knows how much he needs God. His lack of pride allows him to receive all of God's gifts, grace upon grace. He is stripped bare, and ready to be filled with forgiveness. When I read that story I can identify with both of these men, but when I am honest I admit how much I identify with the Pharisee. How often do we think to ourselves, "Well, I may be bad off, but at least I am not like her!" "At least I am not like that." Comparisons are never helpful, and this story illustrates that the worst sort of pride is spiritual pride. It is a barrier to salvation and growth in grace.

Far better to focus only upon ourselves, even if we are as broken and lost as that poor tax collector, "God, please have mercy upon me, a sinner." We all need God so much, and our pride can be a barrier to our growth in grace and faith.

Three years ago, the Rev. Kenneth Phillips dramatically changed his appearance. According to The Dallas Morning News, this is a man who is completely bald ... and hates it. As his hair started retreating years ago he filled in the gaps with fake turf. For 20 years, many churchgoers were never the wiser. Then, one Sunday, in the middle of a sermon, he reached up without warning and removed his hairpiece. Worshipers gasped, choked up, broke out in prayer. They couldn't believe what had just happened. Right before their eyes, their pastor had bared his soul in a sermon, and then bared his head. "It was almost like seeing your pastor naked," said church member John Ragsdale. The sermon leading up to this had been deeply personal. Phillips spoke about vanity and the sin of pride. He confessed that his family of faith did not really know him and that his fake hair had become a barrier with God. When Phillips confessed to the sin of pride and removed his toupee, worshipers were so moved that the event kicked off a revival that garnered national attention. "Once I got over the shock that my pastor wore a toupee, it made me realize how proud and phony we all can be sometimes," said Frianita Wilson. "Our pastor showed us that we couldn't just play at church. We can't just go through the motions of religion. We have to get real with God."

If I were to take something off today to demonstrate my need to be fully authentic with you, it wouldn't be my hair, but the many pretenses I wear. Most days I pretend to know what I am doing, I pretend to be a good Christian who understands God's will and desires. But so often I stumble along in the dark. I want to serve and love God more than anything, but I need God's help all the time.

I am convinced that In order to fully belong to God and to fully belong to one another, we need to strip away our pride. It is such a barrier to intimacy and spiritual growth.

The season of Lent beckons to us to get real, be authentic. Lent is all about admitting that we need help, that we cannot get through this life on our own. We are not the center of the universe, and our opinions, beliefs, ideas, religion or lifestyle are not the least bit superior to anyone else's.

Shortly before his execution in a German concentration camp in 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "When you finally give up trying to make something out of yourself, you throw yourself into the arms of God. And then you walk with Christ in Gethsemane." Give up trying to make something of yourself and throw yourself into the arms of God. There you will find all that you need. And more.

Let us be in the attitude of prayer....

Forgive us, gracious God when we are proud, arrogant, full of ourselves. Forgive us for acting as if we are in charge, and we are superior to others. You know how needy and fragile we really are. Help us to be humble, contrite, and ready to be filled with your forgiving love. Help us to empty ourselves, so that we might fully receive your love, your peace, your grace. It is in the name of the living Christ, that one who has given us all things that we pray. Amen.