

Sermon – May 6-7, 2000  
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The Seven Deadly Sins for Today Series  
Luke 18:9-14

## The Greatest Sin You Can Commit

Last week I began a series on what the ancient church used to call the Seven Deadly Sins. And the reason that I am doing this series is because over the last year I have become increasingly concerned as the church continues to grow, by God's grace, I love that – I love seeing all the new people – but the church continues to grow numerically and we are moving into a new building where we certainly hope we are going to see God's continual grace concerning new people, my concern is are we really making authentic disciples out of all the folks that are here? As I put it last week, as we are getting bigger as a church, are we getting any gooder? Do you know that God wants you to be gooder than you presently are?

It is the easiest trap in the world for a church to fall into, believing that because we are bigger, we are gooder. You know, the Big Mac at McDonald's doesn't necessarily mean that it is a good Mac. And Biggie Fries and the Biggie Shake doesn't necessarily promise good fries and a really great shake. God wants us to become really good people.

So when I taught on the life of a disciple before Easter and we are putting together this discipleship wheel, which is our Vineyard process for making good people, the heart of the concern is are we getting gooder? Are we becoming more forgiving? More kind? More likely to pause in our day, even when we are really, really busy and serve in inconvenience? Are we more likely to pray and less likely to fret?

What I am doing in this series on the Seven Deadly Sins is approaching the subject of becoming gooder, more virtuous, from the negative perspective. What is it that keeps us from being the kind of people that we ought to be? The truth is that most of the analysis of our problems are so superficial. Most of what we think holds us back from being the kind of people we should be and being the kind of Christians we should be, is simply so surface. As I said last week, we are like folks who mow over a patch of weeds in their yard and believe that we have really dealt with our weed problem because we have cut the weeds off at the surface. We simply in the church today do not understand how deeply rooted our real problem is.

And because we have a superficial analysis of our problems, the solution that we suggest to ourselves and to each other is, by definition, also superficial. See, if you think that the root of your problem is that you are from Mars and she is from Venus, or you just have really bad boundaries and you need to learn better boundaries, or you're a smart woman, but you just make foolish choices, your solution to what ails you is just going to be a surface solution. I

am not saying that there is nothing to any of the things I just mentioned or there is nothing to correcting your self-image, or building better boundaries.

What I do want to assert through this series is that if you want to find deep answers, if you want to move out from the shallows and really get into the deeper waters of your life and into a deeper kind of spirituality, then what you pretty much need to do is scrupulously avoid the self-help rack at Barnes and Noble or at Borders, or in most Christian bookstores. Forget the trendy analysis. Forget the trendy language and go back in history. Listen again to what the deep thinkers said about what is wrong with us. Before we have all the pundits and sound bites and the 30-second solutions and the radio call in shows where everything is neatly wrapped up in a one-minute phone call, it is very good for us to go back to what the deep thinkers in the past said. The people who spent thousands of hours on their knees before God.

What the deep thinkers in the church through history said is that at the root of our problems are Seven Deadly Sins. The folks who came up with the list of the Seven Deadly Sins were monks in the Eastern Church, who more than 1500 years ago plumbed the depths of the human heart in a way that it has rarely been plumbed since. These were folks who withdrew from the world, formed little communities out in the desert and spent tons of time alone with God and with their bibles searching out the face of God and searching out their own hearts. Examining their own temptations, their own frailties, their own weaknesses.

What they saw was that all the various sins we commit are really tied to seven fundamental sins that we are going to be exploring over the next several weeks. The order of the list that was then used over the next 1500 years was put together by a very famous and great, great Pope, who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, a man by the name of Gregory the Great. And you see this list of deadly sins mentioned in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in Dante's famous work called *The Divine Comedy*. Essentially what the ancient church for over a 1000 years said was that these seven sins were like the trunk of the tree of sin. And everything else that is wrong from your life comes off from one of these sins as a branch. They said that no other classification of sin works quite this well as a list that begins with pride and goes on to include envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust.

Now, in every single ancient classification of sin, the cardinal sin, the one that was always first in the list of the seven deadly sins was the sin of pride. The ancients saw in the Bible that it was through pride that the Devil became the Devil and lost his position in heaven. It was through pride that Adam and Eve fell. They said that pride was actually at the root of the other six deadly sins. Envy is merely pride that refuses to allow anyone to get ahead of you and that uses every means, slander, gossip, prejudice, sarcasm, to level other people out. And anger is pride that strikes out with resentment and hostility to anyone who gets in the way of your fulfillment of your own needs and your own wants. And it goes so on down the list.

So we have these Seven Deadly Sins, but at the root of all of the sins is this one ultimate sin – pride. Right from the start, I need to tell you want pride is not. When a person says: I am really proud of my son or daughter – that is not necessarily what is condemned in the Bible or by the ancient church. Often when we say that we are proud of someone, we really mean that we admire them. We take joy in their accomplishments. Of course, all of this can be

turned around into the kind of pride that the ancients did condemn. Well, what I really mean by being proud of my son/daughter, is that I must be a really great father. In fact, really, I don't admire them so much, but I admire myself for being so wise, so consistent in my discipline. Yes, while I say I am proud of them, I am really meaning I am admiring myself.

What is being condemned by the sin of pride is not having a sense of self worth, feeling that you do matter, that what you say does have some value, that you are not a nothing in the sight of God; a sense of self respect, a sense of self esteem, a sense of worth. That is not what is being condemned by the sin of pride. By the sin of pride we are talking about an excessive, inordinate, exaggerated sense of yourself and what you deserve in life. By pride we are talking about trying to turn the tables on God and putting yourself as a creature in the place of the creator. By pride we are talking about the assertion of your will and the demand that your will always wins against every other will including the will of God.

By pride we are talking about the very opposite of the first commandment which says, "I am the Lord. You shall have no other Gods before me." Pride says, "No, I am the Lord and I demand that my needs, my wishes and my will be worshipped. And my vision of what life is and my plans be the ones that are ultimately accomplished."

By pride we are talking about the absolute opposite of the first of the Beatitudes which says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We are talking about the wretched, not the blessed, the wretched who say: Forget about coming to God empty and dependent and needy. I am full of myself and full of a sense of my own accomplishments and my own greatness and my own activities. By pride we are ultimately talking about having no sense of your limits, either as a creature or as a sinner.

The Greek word for pride is a word "hubris" from which we get the same English word "hubris," which means going beyond your bounds, not respecting your limitations, either the limitations of yourself as a creature, not respecting your creatureliness or not respecting your limitations as a sinner. It is pride that says I don't care what limit God sets up, what boundaries he erects. He says to not marry outside the faith. I don't care. I am going to do it. I am going to assert my will and my vision of life. God says don't have sex outside of marriage. We say well, too bad. I know my ultimate joy, my ultimate happiness is locked up in violating the will of the creator in establishing my own vision for a happy life.

No sense of limits. It is pride that is at the root of burnout where a woman says, "I have to be super mom. Even though I have 2-3 toddlers under the age of 5, I have to bake bread and homeschool and have my own home-based business on the web, while keeping a perfectly ordered and clean home. It is pride, which says I have no limits as a human being. I can do everything. I can keep 14-thousand balls up in the air.

It is pride, which not only doesn't respect your limits as a creature, as someone who is frail, who gets tired, who needs breaks. But it is also pride, which doesn't respect your limits as a sinner. How often do we find that at the root of someone's dreadful fall into adultery or substance abuse or some other addictive behavior is this prideful illusion about self which says, "I can handle this." Virtually every drug addict believed at the beginning of their drug use that they could handle what they were experimenting with. That is why the Bible says

that pride comes before destruction. I can handle this temptation. I can handle this relationship. It doesn't matter that I am traveling alone to a motel with someone of the opposite sex on business. I can handle close shoulder to shoulder relationships without being ensnared emotionally or physically.

It is pride which doesn't listen to the warning, "He who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall."

This morning, we are going to take a look at The Greatest Sin You Can Commit, the root of every other sin. The first on the list of the Seven Deadly Sins is the sin of pride. Let's pray.

Will you open your bibles to Luke 18:9-14.

*Luke 18:9-14 "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: God, I thank you that I am not like all other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said: God, have mercy on me, a sinner. I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'"*

What we see in Luke's arrangements in the stories in chapter 18 is the continual movement back and forth between a story regarding humility and a story regarding pride. A person who is empty and dependent and a person who is full of themselves and independent. So Luke starts off chapter 18 with the story of a widow, who was in need. And then we see a story of the proud Pharisee, the one we are looking at today. And then in vv. 15-17, he alternates back to humility and dependence by talking about us becoming like little children. In then in v. 18 he picks up the theme of pride and self-sufficiency again as he tells us the story of the rich young ruler. Finally, we see in both Jesus' prediction of his death and the blind beggar, an example of humility and dependence.

Back and forth; back and forth. Contrasting humility, being poor in spirit, being empty and self-sufficiency and self-assertion, independence and willfulness. Let's look at this story.

*Luke 18:9-14 "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.'"*

Now these two men initially at least have a great deal in common. First of all, they are two men. They are not two different orders of being. He didn't say an earthworm and an archangel went into the Temple. It wasn't a plankton and a physics professor who were engaged in this discussion of the nature of the universe. They are both the same kind of being, two men, and they are both engaged in the same activity – prayer. And they both go to the same place to find God – the Temple.

It is important to pause here. These two men went not out into nature to find God. They didn't go into themselves in some sort of meditation. They went to the Temple to find God and pray.

I talked with more and more folks who say, “I don’t go to church. My church is Blendon Woods. That’s where I find God. I find God at High Banks. I find God as I am bicycling through Southern Ohio. I find God as I listen to classical music or jazz, or poetry.”

There is absolutely a very real truth that we can have vivid experiences out in nature. There can be as you walk in beautiful places a real sense of the divine, a sense that all this beauty, this order, this grandeur that is flooding over me gives me a profound sense of awe and wonder. But there is a great limit on the God of nature and a person’s church being High Banks Park. And there is also a great limit on the God of music, the God of poetry and meditation, where I find God when I just quiet myself and empty myself for 20 minutes and do breathing exercises and stretching exercises.

The great limit on the God of nature and poetry and meditation is that such a God never challenges me. I may be filled with wonder, awe and appreciation. But the God of nature and meditation will never confront me or you about sleeping with your girlfriend. The God of nature will never confront you about your divorce or the grounds for your impending divorce. Or the shameful way that you or I might relate to our mothers or our employees. A sense of the divine, a wonder of the trees, will never cause us to repent or experience any real pangs of conscience. In fact, if my own experience of nature is any measure at all, the God of nature won’t even provide me with enough conviction to pick up my dirty socks and put them in the hamper. The God of nature typically will affirm whatever it is that you are into. No challenge, no confrontation, no limit, no rebuke, no line, which says that if you cross this, you are crossing me. No lines at all.

The fact is apart from the Temple, the God appointed place of revelation that is what the Temple is, the God appointed place where we get to interpret life correctly. In New Testament times the Temple has been replaced by the church and the scriptures. But apart from the God appointed place of revelation, we can’t even read the witness of nature correctly.

There was a great Christian in the past by the name of John Calvin who used to talk about how the Bible was spectacles, they were eyeglasses that assisted us in reading nature. See, apart from the Bible and putting on the lens of the Bible and the lens of the church, you could end up worshipping nature. You could worship the sun and worship the trees and worship the creation. But in our fallenness, we are legally blind. We never see anything right unless we put on the eyeglasses of the Temple, the church, the scriptures.

And so what I see in both the Pharisee and the tax collector is that both of these men know that the place to find the real God, not only the God who created nature, but the Lord of life, the one who commands and demands, the one who corrects and disciplines, the one who loves and heals, but also rebukes. The place of encounter with the true God, who is going to run a spear through you and then after he does, heal you, free you and deliver you. The place to meet the true God who stings your conscience. They understand the place where that is is the Temple.

For us today as a result of the New Testament, we would say to someone, “You are never going to find the true God and have the deepest kind of encounter with the true God in nature alone or in meditation alone or in poetry alone or in music alone.” All those things

are good and will create in you awe and wonder, but never a sense of limit or conviction or a pang of conscience or real salvation and real freedom from what keeps you in bondage. To get those things, to become a gooder person than you presently are, you need to meet God in the Bible and you need to meet God in authentic community, in a church where people are really relating to one another like true Christians.

So both these men take God seriously. And it is important as we explore the differences between these two men that we not turn this Pharisee into a cartoon or a caricature as we are so apt to do. He is not just some guy walking around letting everyone know how much he put into the offering plate, just so full of himself. This is a man who is absolutely dead serious about God and about his religion. When he says that he is not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and that he fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all he gets. He is not lying. He is not someone who says one thing and does another. He is dead serious.

So often we miss the force of Jesus' words to us because we turn these folks in the Bible into cartoons. This is a real guy who really takes his faith seriously. He is serious enough to pay a price, which is beyond what most of us pay. He gives up his meals faithfully. He writes a check to the Temple each week. This is the person, who because he or she is giving to the church can't go on the great vacation or buy a great car or do the stuff on their house that they otherwise would be able to afford to do. But, they say that's OK, because I am doing what I believe is right by tithing and giving. This is a person who otherwise would have Saturday night free to watch a video or to hang out with their friends or to go out to dinner, but who instead chooses to teach five year olds in the church Sunday School. They say, "That's alright because I am doing what I believe in. I am doing what I believe is right."

Let's stop caricaturing this guy and see the good in his life. This Pharisee is the earnest, sincere, religious person who hangs in there in a difficult marriage. Who has long since seen that it is a total myth that so long as you have God in your marriage everything is going to be easy. He understands that there are lots of difficult marriages; lots of hard marriages; lots of marriages where you forever will struggle financially and where there is always disappointment in the level of affection shown. He understands that you just hang in there even though your spouse is very sick or you are caring for a profoundly handicapped child, or you have a wife or husband who is simply incapable, at least up to this point, of overcoming the trauma of their pasts. Or they are unwilling to deal with particular sin issues. Or you have all the burdens of a blended family and the ex-spouse of your current spouse.

This is a sincere religious person who says, "I am not going to bail out, even though this relationship is really hard, I am not heading for the door. I am not going to do what I see my friends doing and what some counselor said I had the right to do."

Let's not turn this tax collector into a cartoon either. You know, the tax collector in the cartoon version, is this utterly loveable, but slightly bad Don Juan, perhaps. The guy with the black leather jacket in your high school, who works on his car and has the reputation for being bad. But he is loveable. He is a charmer who has the great smile. You just have to love him. The guy or girl with the winning personality, who is just pushing the edge and doing some things that the super conservative folks don't have the nerve or the courage to

do, but really want to. This tax collector is not John Travolta in the movie “Grease” or in his previous incarnation, those of you who are really old, Vinny Barbarino.

This tax collector is a bad, bad person through and through. This tax collector is a snake. He is someone who sold out his country. Do you understand what a tax collector did? This is a person who worked for and collaborated with the occupying power, the invaders. So he has accommodated himself to the invaders of his country. He has not only accommodated himself, but actually worked actively with them and collaborated. He extorted money from widows and from the poor. This tax collector is on the equivalent of the French collaborator in WWII who aids and abets the Nazis for the purpose of making a little money for himself. He is the guy who seems to have no conscience. “Hey, I made money under the French and I will make money under the Germans. It doesn’t matter to me. So long as I make money, business is business.”

This is the snake. The person who walks away from his marriage and hooks up with another man or woman without even apologizing. The person who intimates, “Well, if you only knew what I had to live with. I am not going to cast aspersions on my ex-wife...” but with a wink and a stare you know it must have been really bad for him, otherwise he wouldn’t have walked away. The person who leaves his wife with two toddlers because he doesn’t want the obligation of a family. The snake.

This tax collector is not a cartoon. He is the guy who steals your clients and steals your accounts and steals your boyfriend and stabs you in the back. OK, you got the scene? It is not caricatures we are talking about. These are two very different people. The sincere earnest religious person, the good church goer and the back stabber, the one who has always lived life on their own terms and along the way hurt lots and lots of people.

So why is the good guy condemned and the bad guy accepted?

Let me tell you something about how to read Jesus’ stories so that they don’t become cartoons for you. Whenever you read a parable, write this down, put yourself into each of the roles. Never say, “Well, I am this person or that person.” Put yourself in each of the roles.

So, if you are reading the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 say, “Well, first of all, I am the rebellious son who takes God’s gifts for granted and sometimes spits in God’s face. And I am also the older brother who often judges lost people. And sometimes God has me in the role of the waiting father where my heart breaks as I wait for the repentance of someone I love.”

So what I am saying is that whenever you read the word Pharisee in the Bible, you can just cross that word out and put your name in it. Don’t ever say, “Well, that is someone else. That is what those awful religious people are like.” That is what you are like! And I am like! When our sincere earnest faith in God starts turning rancid.

The second thing for you to see as we read this text is that our judgments of what people are like are not ultimately the final judgment. We don’t see everything there is to see in the back stabber or the sincere, earnest religious person. Real life is a lot more tricky than what our

surface reads of one another would indicate. The big difference between people is often a lot deeper than one person goes to church and another doesn't. Or that one person has left their spouse and another hasn't.

See, this parable tells us that we really don't know each other in any ultimate sense. That is why we are urged by scripture to not judge in the sense of not rendering any ultimate conclusions on where someone stands with God, because we don't see everything. We don't see the back stabber's shame and sense of sorrow before God.

God comes knocking the church goer says, "No. No. My will, not your will, my will, not your will." We don't see if a person is regularly closing the door to God or is instead in their brokenness, shame and sorrow regularly opening the door to God. We just see two people wander into church – one that looks like a really good person; and one who has blown up their lives and have a mess of it all. Let's not be too quick in our judgments to say the one we know is accepted by God and the other we know is condemned. Because God may turn our judgments on their heads.

What is the ultimate difference? The ultimate difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector had to do with this issue of pride. It all boiled down before God to pride, at least in terms of their relationship with God. What did the Pharisee appeal to in his relationship with God?

Well, we read in v. 11 that the Pharisee appealed to his track record. He said: *God, I thank you that I am not like all other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.*

In his relationship with God the Pharisee appeals to his track record with God. As I come before you, God, I reflect on what I have done and what I haven't done. And you know, God that I have been trying my best and have been going to church. I don't curse nearly as much as I used to when someone cuts me off in traffic. I actually have a place of service in the church. I am giving now and I have really been trying in my marriage. I have deliberately chosen to not date outside the faith. I go to a small group and I have my quiet time almost every day. I have been praying and I have been reading my Bible. I even listen to Christian radio now.

What's wrong with appealing to your track record? What is so distasteful to God is not that a person has been faithful because their faithfulness means nothing. Or that going to church and sacrificing and giving money is just the same as going to church and using all your money for a more expensive vacation to Disney World. The problem with appealing to your track record is the underlying idea that as a result God of all that I have done, you now owe me. His pride, the unstated assumption of in light of all that I have done for you, God, in light of all that I have given up, in light of all my effort, you owe me.

We might not actually say that. We might actually pray over our track record. Or even bring it up with God. But very often deep in our hearts, at the root of our problem with God, at the root of many people's alienation with God and bitterness toward God and shutting the door on God is this idea that I followed the rules. I got my ticket punched. And God you aren't keeping your end of the bargain. I am mad because even though I really have gone



after it, I am still single and I haven't had a date in years. Or I am still sick. Or I am still separated. Or the job I wanted went to someone else. Or my mother, father or grandmother got their ticket punched and they served you and you gave them the short end of the stick.

At the bottom of the appeal to a track record is the assertion before God that you don't know how to keep you end of the bargain, God. And I will tell you, friends, you can look into yourself. But if there is any bitterness in your heart toward God, you are coming very close to the root of your problem, which is pride. You owed me and you didn't pay up.

See, appeals to our track record are really just attempts to turn the tables on God. To put God in our debt, in other words. To say to the creator, "I no longer want to be in the role of creature and debtor. I am going to turn the tables on you. I am going to become your equal even your superior, God, and now I am your creditor and you are my debtor." That's pride.

Brothers and sisters, listen to me here. God is never ever under any circumstance at any time to anyone in any place – God never was, never is, and never will be in your or anyone else's debt. No matter how much you feel God owes you, God is always your creditor. He is always the source, always the fountain, always the giver, always the creator. He is never the creature.

See, I want you to contrast the Pharisee's review of his track record before God with the prayer of the tax collector where he says in v. 13: *God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* Not, let me review my track record, but be merciful to me. The humble person never appeals to merit. The humble person always appeals to God's mercy. The only way I ever stand before you is mercy. Sheer mercy. The humble person comes before God and they say, "I owe my existence to God. The very way my DNA is arranged in my body, the fact that my lungs work at all, the fact that I can breathe, the fact that my kidneys work and I can go to the bathroom, the fact that I ate something and that I have clothes on, that I have a roof over my head, that I can take a shower – its all your gift, God. I owe you. Humility says that if I am one micron different than I used to be, if I have stopped partying or if I go to church, or if I have forgiven anyone, or if I pray, or if I am doing what they aren't doing, it is because of you and your mercy God. If I see anything in me that is good, if I have told the truth where I used to lie, if I serve in inconvenience where I used to manipulate my way out of things, if I have hung in in a difficult marriage, if I have been courageous, it has just been sheer mercy, always mercy.

This is the prayer that God accepts. This is the prayer that gets all the way up to heaven. That doesn't bounce off the ceiling of your room: "Be merciful to me." The person that God accepts, the prayer that God affirms is "God, you have been so good in the past. You have been so merciful to me, now please be merciful again. Be merciful to my daughter. Be merciful to my mother. Show me mercy again, sheer mercy, for no other reason other than you are a God who is rich in mercy. You aren't cheap. You aren't stingy. Father, you are a merciful father. Out of the abundance of your mercy, be merciful to me in this area. In my finances, regarding my rebellious child, in my desire for lifelong companionship, in the repentance of the love one – not my merit. You don't owe me a thing. But out of your mercy, be merciful to me." That is a prayer that reaches into the very heart of God.

And pride is not only found in what a person appeals to in their relationship with God. But the way the standard that a person uses to measure themselves. To figure out how good or bad you are, what you are like, you need a standard. I want you to notice what the standard is that the Pharisee uses to measure himself. V. 11, *The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself [or to himself], God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*” The Pharisee’s standard is other people.

CS Lewis, the great English Christian writer, said in one of the best defenses of Christianity written in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a book called, “Mere Christianity,” which I would say to you if you have never read, Mere Christianity, hock your watch, pawn your family heirlooms, but buy Mere Christianity and read it. In fact, if there is one Christian book that every single thinking Christian ought to read and try to understand, it is Mere Christianity. It is great. And if it has been years since you read it, if you read it 15-20 years ago, pick it up and read it again. But it was written originally as a series of radio addresses during WWII. Lewis in one marvelous radio address on the sin of pride, which he calls the Great Sin, says that the essence of pride is found in our tendency to measure ourselves by comparing ourselves with each other. Listen to Lewis’ statements:

“I pointed out a moment ago that the more pride one held, the more one disliked pride in others. In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are, the easiest way is to ask yourself, ‘How much do I dislike it when other people snub me or refuse to take any notice of me; or shove their way in or patronize me or show off?’ The point is each person’s pride is in competition with everyone else’s pride. It is because I wanted to be the big noise at the party that I am so annoyed at someone else being the big noise. Two of a trade never agree. Now what you want to get clear [listen to this, this is the point] is that pride is essentially competitive, is competitive by its very nature, while other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others. If everyone became equally rich, or clever, or good looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud. The pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone. That is why I say that pride is essentially competitive in a way that other vices are not. The sexual impulse may drive two men into competition if they both want the same girl, but that is only by accident. They might have just as likely wanted two different girls. But a proud man will take your girl from you not because he wants her, but just to prove that he is a better man than you. Greed may drive men into competition if there is not enough to go around. But the proud man, even when he has more than he can possibly want, will try to get still more to assert his power.”

Lewis says the essence of pride is competition and comparison. How often do we use others as our standard of measuring ourselves? If you think about it, nearly always.

I can’t believe that so and so did such and such. I would never eat that much at a party. I guess they felt like it was free food, so hey, eat up.

I would never give as poor a tip as he did. I can’t believe how cheap he is.

I would never dress like they did. I mean everything was hanging out.

I would never be so extravagant in my furnishings or shop where she shops.

Or discipline my kids by spanking them. Or let my kids go the kinds of movies those parents let their kids go to.

I wouldn't take off early just because I worked hard the night before. In comparison to them, I am a really good person.

The point is that the direction of the eye when a person is full of pride is always down. They look down on others or horizontally, comparing themselves with someone else. I want you again to notice the difference in the heart attitude between the Pharisee and the tax collector, at least in terms of what they use or who they use for their point in examining their own lives. When the tax collector prays, he doesn't drag someone else into God's presence. He stands alone with God. It says, *But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God have mercy on me, a sinner."*

The humble person does not come into the presence of God with someone else as their point of comparison. With the humble person, it is just me and you, God. The humble person stands before God totally alone, totally on their own – just me and you, God. And when he says, *God have mercy on me, a sinner*. At least that is the way it is written in the NIV. That is a very poor translation. It should read, "God have mercy on me, THE sinner." Not A sinner, but THE sinner. God, be merciful to me, the sinner. When I stand naked before you, God, when it is just me and you alone – when I stop looking down or horizontally at my neighbor, but I look up at you and I stare into your face and I am made aware of how merciful you have been to me in the past, and how much you have given me, how gracious you are, what you did for me on the cross in sending your son, how you've always been good and you never stop being good to me through good times and bad, then I see myself as the very essence and embodiment of sin so that I call myself before you THE sinner.

Paul, toward the end of his life, after he had served God as an apostle for over 30 years, faithfully and loyally, putting it all on the line, living wholly for God. Here is this guy who preached the gospel, who suffered and was beaten, who was stoned and imprisoned, who performed incredible miracles. Through Paul there were incredible signs and wonders. He cast out demons. He healed the sick. He raised the dead. Toward the end of his life, Paul said about himself as he stands before God alone in 1 Timothy 1, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst." Not Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I used to be the worst; of whom before my conversion I was the worst; of whom before I really grew into my present stature, when I was a really immature Christian I used to be really bad.

He says at the end of his life, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst." Here is humility. To stand before God and say, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." You never outgrow a sense of sin as you stand before God and recognize how much you need his forgiveness, how dependent you are on him, how often you miss the point of everything he gives you – you miss the point of money. You miss the point of

church. You miss the point of your marriage. You miss the point of friendship. How many opportunities as you stand before God and you remember how many opportunities you had to do good and to say good things and you missed it and blew it. The more often, its just you and God and your eyes on him. You compare yourself to him by all he has done for you and the more you can say with all real honesty, “I am the very epitome of the sinner.”

So what is it that God blesses? What kind of person gets accepted by God? What kind of person goes away empty?

Jesus tells us in v. 14: *I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

The Bible says over and over again that God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. And it strikes me that there are many of you who have not been blessed in life and you don't understand why, but you really have spent much of your life being opposed by God. Whoever exalts himself, will be humbled; whoever humbles himself will be exalted. God opposes the proud.

Have you ever considered that the one you are wrestling with most of your life has been God? And it is all been about your pride, about the assertion of your self-will. The reason you are not moving forward is because God has been hindering your advance. You have insisted on your own way. You wanted to live life on your own terms.

And the opposition from God is not necessarily regarding the surface things of life. It may not be coming in the way of your finances or your business. Sometimes your business may be flourishing and you have a big house, but you have virtually no fellowship with God. And such a lack of peace and blessing on your marriage or with your kids and everything inside is all churned up.

What kind of person receives blessing from God? The humble person. Let's go through this. Pride comes before God and pleads your merit. Humility comes before God and pleads for mercy. Pride calls to mind what we have done for God. Humility comes before God and remembers what he did for us. Pride compares self with others. Humility compares self with God. Pride looks down on others. Humility looks up to God. Pride says you owe me, God. Humility says you owe me nothing. Pride says you are my debtor. Humility says always, always, always you are my creditor. Be merciful to me, the sinner.

Gospel Call: You know, the essence of what keeps people from giving their lives to Christ ultimately boils down to what I have been talking about today – pride. Some of you may be puzzled about why it is that you haven't up till now completely surrendered your life to Christ. But isn't really the problem in your life your pride? That up until now you wanted to maintain your independence. You wanted to call your own shots? You wanted to be your own boss? You haven't wanted to admit your limits. Your needs. Maybe you have tried to turn the tables on God and have been upset with God. Maybe you have had a sense that God owed you. You don't want to be classified with all the fanatical Christians in the eyes of your family. You have seen how they have treated your sister or brother. Maybe you don't want to be classified with fanatical Christians at your job or among your friends, in your dormitory or in your apartment. It's all pride.

For many of you, you may have thought it was something else. I know people think they have been kept from God because of intellectual problems. That there is an intellectual barrier or a cultural barrier or some other barrier. But the root or ultimate barrier is pride. And when you see that, you have a way out. So long as today you are willing to give up your self will and kneel before God. So long as you are willing to recognize that you are a person in need of mercy, you can surrender to Christ.