

PRIDE

(THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS)

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ENVY – GRATITUDE

ANGER – FAITH

SLOTH – HOPE

GREED – GENEROSITY

GLUTTONY – TEMPERANCE

LUST – LOVE

So we come at last to the seventh spectrum, the deadliest source of sin and evil known to humankind – and the highest source of light and joy, the most life-giving virtue possible for humankind. We also come to the parting of the ways for many people, a parting of the way from Christianity.

At times we have seemed to be merely playing word games, trying to hunt down and comprehend concepts as they were used and meant by the saints. Maybe it's possible to come away from this list simply remembering that sloth is a flock of bears or that pride is a company of lions. With pride, however, we are also at the very core of the concepts – at the core of the Christian understanding of what is conducive to life and what leads to death. The conclusion is disturbing in the extreme.

It takes only a moment to focus. Would you rather have your children proud, self-confident, with a proper sense of their own dignity and value, or would you like your children to be meek, lowly, submissive, humiliated? I pick on the children because that allows us to be somewhat objective and totally involved at the same time. We want the very best for our children. Do we want humility or pride to be the standard and hallmark of our children's lives? Do we want powerful, strong, self-assured winners, or do we want lowly, humble, sensitive receivers?

Between these two there is no neutral ground, no happy medium. Pride and humility represent two very different ways of life, two enormously contradictory value systems, two opposite ways of understanding everything. Nor have I cheated or slanted the issue by the synonyms I have used.

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Pride: a sense of one's own proper dignity or value, self-respect; pleasure or satisfaction taken from one's work, achievements, or possessions; the most successful or thriving condition, as in "the pride of youth." That sounds good to us – proper – like something every human being should have, and the more the better. Yes we want our children to have that kind of pride in themselves, their family, their community, their nation. Someday we hope they will be able to take pride in their own homes, children, work, and accomplishments.

Humility: modesty, submission or self-abasement; lack of pride. *Humble*: meek, modest; showing deferential respect; lacking high station; lowly, unpretentious. *Humbled*: to destroy the pride of; to abase, degrade. *Humiliate*: to lower the pride, dignity, or status of; to disgrace. (Interesting! I Peter 5:5 says, "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*"; the dictionary says to be humbled is to be disgraced – to have your grace taken away. Somebody is obviously confused!) *Humiliation*: degradation, disgrace (again), shame, mortification. This is clearly not what we want for ourselves or our children.

Yet John Donne, English poet and theologian (1572-1631), says, "Humiliation is the beginning of sanctification." Sanctification is something we very much do want, at least for our children. Among other things, it means to be made fit for heaven – fit for relationship with God and with the whole company of saints. The saints of old say that humility is not just a nice virtue to keep hidden away somewhere, to be used in small doses. Humility is the queen of all the virtues – the one without which the others will do us no good. Humility is the setting in which all other virtues thrive and grow.

Something or someone is confused! I remember the first time I got into this crossfire between pride and humility. All Christian writings honor and extol the virtues of humility, yet everything I had been taught by the environment and psychology of my culture pointed to pride. I thought at first it was just a semantic puzzle, but "pride carried to the point of arrogance" or "humility carried to the extreme of self-deprecation" is not just a misunderstanding. "*The meek shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the meek.*" The Bible talks one way, recommending humility; our culture recommends the other way, the way of pride.

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At first I tried to check the earlier usages. Sometimes it was fun. *Tuphoo*, one of the New Testament words for pride, means to make a big smoke, to inflate with self-conceit. *Ga'own*, one of the Hebrew words for pride, means to swell up (hence haughtiness), to mount up, to rise, to be majestic, to triumph. *Humilis*, the Latin root for humble, comes from *humus* – earth, ground, soil; “*Dust you were, and to dust you shall return*” – hence low, lowly, base, of the earth, earthy. A few still associate humility with the notion of simplicity: being in tune or in harmony with nature, with the primary life forces.

None of these usages help, however. They only confirm the great gulf between the two concepts of what humans should be like. But at least the concepts are consistent through time. The pride side says it is good for people to be proud, self-sufficient, self-confident, independent. It is good to be powerful, to be able to control things, to know what we want and to go after it with self-assurance. If sometimes this borders on arrogance, insolence, or feelings of superiority, it needs to be toned down a bit. You do not get many points in our society for being humble. You do get points for *acting* humble after important victories or achievements or awards, but that’s just for show and it fools nobody. You do not get points for *being* humble.

The Christian side actually encourages humility and warns against pride. Jesus says many times that those who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 14:11; 18:14; Matthew 23:12) There is a parable about two men who go to pray; God hears the humble one. This sermon’s readings are astounding passages about the place and importance of humility. It is a steady theme throughout the Scriptures: “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*” (Proverbs 16:18) “[S]erving the Lord with all humility and with tears” (Acts 20:19) “*Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another*” (I Peter 5:5)

The light did not break for me while thinking about humility, but while working with its greatest synonym, meekness. The two are used interchangeably. When I tried to be what I thought of as meek, I always became ineffective, at best, or, as was more often the case, I became phony or passively manipulative. I could not get anything to connect in real life with “the meek shall inherit the earth.” Nobody I identified as meek was going to inherit anything, at least not for very long. Then I stumbled onto that line in Scripture: “*Now the man Moses was very meek, more so than all men that were on the face of the earth.*” (Numbers 12:3)

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I knew enough about Moses to know that if he was taking blue ribbons and high honors for being meek, I surely did not know what the word meant. I tracked it down again and, sure enough, it meant submissive, obedient, subservient. Who? Moses? That was a laugh! But there was a catch: Moses was not obedient, subservient, or submissive to Pharaoh, or even to Aaron or Miriam or Caleb or Joshua, or to any human being on the face of the earth. Moses was submissive *to God alone!* Meek has that special definition: SUBSERVIENT TO GOD ALONE. If you are meek toward God, you do not have time to be meek toward anything or anyone else. To be meek toward anything *except God* is idolatry. Suddenly, for me at least, everything started to click into place.

Humility carries the same significance. The lowliness, submission, modesty, self-abasement, unpretentiousness – all of it is in relationship *to God*, in awareness of God’s greatness and sovereignty, and it is not to be applied or practiced in any other context or relationship.

Then people say to me: “Now it comes together. We use pride language in our relationship to the people and things of this world; if we are talking about God, then we must switch to the words of humility.”

It’s not that easy. There is no place for pride with God’s children. Why do we have to switch from language to language? To stay humble and meek – subservient and obedient to God – is the only stance we have time for. Let the rest fall where it will. If we keep switching to pride’s language, we also keep switching to its attitudes and methods.

That brings us to the crux of the concept of pride. Pride is not about true confidence, and it is never about joy. True confidence comes from God, rests upon God’s authority, depends upon God’s purposes and power. Listen to pride’s language: self-confidence; self-assurance; self-sufficient; I am going to do this; I have the capabilities; I believe in myself; I have faith in myself. Is the language just terribly twisted, or do we really mean what we sound like?

Pride is about being independent and self-sufficient. Pride must have power, must be in control, must make sure that it has its own way. It is unteachable, refuses help, is ever aloof and increasingly alone. Pride is the denial of finiteness, mortality, imperfection, incompleteness. It is always the greatest spiritual sickness of humankind.

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Pride energizes and leads the other six Deadly Sins. It empowers lust, gluttony, and greed. With sloth (depression), pride says: “I was not honored, promoted, supported like I should have been. I would have made such great contributions, but nobody helped, nobody recognized my worth. To hell with the world, and especially with all those who should have supported me and didn’t. I quit. That will teach them. I don’t care anymore.”

The teammanship is also clear with anger. Anger comes from fear, and fear is the backside of pride. And finally, pride is at the other end of the “spectrum of evil” from envy. The envious want to be in control but cannot manage it, so they fight all those they think are making it. Pride is king and organizer of the Seven Deadly Sins. Adding it to any of the others takes it to the max, heightening it many times over.

One other thing must be said. Pride is just as deadly when it goes after the good as when it goes after power or evil. If pride claims that it wants to rule and control for good motives, to accomplish wonderful things, it is still pride and ever the king of the Seven Deadly Sins. Wherever in our lives we want power or want to be in control, we are in competition against God and moving into deadly ways. Coming to realize this, I come to know how much I need the Savior.

If we want to do any good, we must become humble. Pride is the killer, no matter what its motives. By definition and content, pride does not desire to worship God. It desires to be *like* God, to act like a god, to have others treat it like a god. That is why pride is so afraid of faith, trust, love, fellowship, and anything that requires letting go of power or control. Clearly pride keeps us away from God, and it keeps us in animosity toward God.

“If God does not exist,” wrote Dostoevsky, “then everything is permitted.” (From *The Brothers Karamazov*.) Then pride is the proper and only sensible approach. If God *does* exist, then humility is the only stance that makes sense or has a hope of letting God lead us into truth and love and light. Humility is the rejection of all power for one’s own purposes, whether it be the power of knowledge, affection, physical prowess, technology, or whatever. Humility is knowing that God is greater than we are; that God has wisdom we do not have; that our rightful stance is to be teachable, subservient, obedient, aware of our great need, and eager to receive in gratitude, trust, and joy.

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Pride is the ultimate alienator (sin-bearer, sin source) because it says to God: I do not want or need you. “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” (From “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley.)

Humility says the opposite. Humility admits its need, its weakness, its desire for communion. Therefore, humility is the greatest of the virtues because, more than all the others, it constantly invites God to come, to be in charge, to take the lead, to reconcile us and put us back on the rightful path. And there is nothing God cannot fix if we come to God in humility. There is no way God can help us in our pride, because no matter what God does or offers, we turn away and reject the gift.

To sum it up: Pride is the ultimate stance of the true atheist. Humility is the opposite. Whenever we wish to know where we truly are on the faith journey, we have only to check our position on the spectrum between pride and humility. This is where belief and unbelief are truly measured.