

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 20, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

LUKE 22:24 and JOHN 13:12-15

“A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.”

“When He had finished washing their feet, He put His outer garment back on and returned to His place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ He asked them. ‘You call Me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.’”

RESPECTABLE SINS

(4) THE MOTHER OF ALL SINS

We deal this morning with something which, according to human standards, is another most “respectable” sin. It is, nevertheless, one of the traditional seven deadly sins, regarded by our Lord as being in the same category with murder and adultery. I refer to the sin of pride.

According to the old Hebrew story, it was pride which caused the downfall of Satan. The ancient story had it that originally Satan was an angel of light, indeed, an archangel. But pride crept onto the throne of his life; he aspired to equality with God, and the inevitable result was his ultimate and utter degradation. Listen to how Isaiah describes what happened: “How you have fallen from heaven, Oh Lucifer, son of the morning!... You said in your heart... ‘I will raise my throne above the stars of God... I will make myself like the Most-High.’ But you are brought down to the depths of the pit” (14:12ff).

Now when we speak of pride we must remember that

1. Self-esteem is not pride. Indeed, a healthy, humble self-respect is a Christian virtue. Many of the people whom our Lord lifted out of the gutter began to regain their self-respect the very moment they came under the influence of His forgiving love.

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” said our Lord (Matthew 19:19). Self-love and self-respect are born of the conviction that we have been made in the image of God, and that we are of such worth to God that He gave His Son to die for us. The person who knows that through Christ he has been redeemed at such a cost is the person who will always endeavor to maintain his self-esteem. “Pride” in work well done is not really pride, but rather it is satisfaction in doing the best job you possibly could; and that is entirely commendable.

2. Pleasure in being praised is not pride. The child whose father pats him on the back for a piece of work well done, the Christian believer to whom Christ says, “Well done,” are pleased, and they ought to be; for here the pleasure lies not in what you are, or in what you have done, but rather in the fact that you have pleased someone you wanted to please.

3. It is not pride to be “proud” of someone you love. To be “proud” of your husband, or wife, of your child or your country really means “to have a warm-hearted admiration for”; and such an admiration is, of course, very far from being a sin. Indeed, to congratulate someone, and tell him or her how “proud” you are of their accomplishment, may be the opportunity for you to exercise one of your spiritual gifts -- the gift of encouragement.

When we speak of “pride,” you are to think, rather, of that subtle, insidious idea that makes you think you are just a cut above the next person: the feeling that makes you look down your nose, just a bit, at someone else.

As C.S. Lewis points out: “Pride is the essential vice, the utmost evil. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea-bites in comparison.”

I heard recently about a man who encountered a little girl carrying a huge mass of cotton candy on a paper cone. He asked, “How can a little girl like you eat all of that cotton candy?” “Well, you see, Mister,” she answered, “I’m really much bigger on the inside than I am on the outside.” Pride leads us to pretend to be bigger on the outside than we are on the inside.

I want to show you this sin of pride working itself out in the conduct of a few men.

In a state of suppressed excitement, they are walking through the streets of Jerusalem one night as darkness falls. The conflict is reaching a climax, and their Master is about to proclaim Himself in awesome power and bring in a new age of Jewish freedom and self-government. At least, this is their reading of the situation. And as they walked, they talked about their own prospects of promotion and fortune when Jesus would seize power and deliver captive Israel. And in the process of their discussion regarding their political aspirations, they began to argue hotly about their individual rights and privileges in the coming kingdom.

“I desire to be Secretary of State when the kingdom is established.”

“Why should you receive that appointment? I have far better qualifications for that position.”

“Well, what about me? I can handle finance as none of you can. I carry the purse; I ought to be Secretary of the Treasury.”

And so, the hateful bickering continued, and every word must have been a knife in the soul of their Master, Who, unknown to them, overheard every word. How could these proud place-seekers ever be His apostles and missionaries to the world?

And so, they came to the Upper Room, those twelve men, heated and angry and huffy; as Dr. Marcus Dods remarked, “like so many sulky schoolboys.” Right at the door of the room, according to the custom of the East, there was a large pitcher full of water, a basin, a clean towel and a handy apron. The roads of Palestine were quite unsurfaced and uncleaned. In dry weather, they were inches deep in dust, and in wet weather they were liquid mud. The shoes the ordinary

people wore were sandals, and these sandals were simply soles held on the feet by a few straps. They gave little protection against the dust or mud of the roads. For that reason, a pitcher of water was always placed at the door of an Eastern home, and a servant was there to wash the soiled feet of the guests as they came in.

Now Jesus' little company of friends had no servants, so the disciples were no doubt in the habit of doing this kindly service in turn. Peter would do it one day, Bartholomew another, and Andrew the next. But on this particular evening, after the heated argument about their individual positions in the new kingdom, their pride stood out like a sore thumb, and not one of them offered to perform the usual act of courtesy!

"Catch me doing it if John or Peter won't! I must stand on my dignity and assert my rights!" Dirty feet or no dirty feet, good manners or no good manners, courtesy or no courtesy, not one of those twelve men, puffed up with pride and anxious only about their own rights and privileges, would even admit that he had noticed such a thing as a pitcher, a basin, a towel, or an apron!

And Jesus was aware of all this, and it cut Him to the quick. Suddenly, He could stand the tension no longer, and while the meal was still in progress, He rose quietly, walked to the door, where He slipped off His outer robe. He picked up the despised apron and put it on, laid the towel across His arm, and carried the basin over to the dumbfounded men. Then He knelt down and unloosed the sandals of the first man, and amid shamed silence, began to wash from the disciples' feet the clogging dust of the roadway.

He came to Matthew, the former tax collector. Matthew was the one disciple who was undoubtedly well-off; although how he had made his money is another matter! When Jesus had called him to be a disciple he made a great banquet in his house and invited a large company of his friends (Luke 5:29). I suppose in his home in Galilee Matthew was used to having servants dance attendance to him. He had never washed any of his guests' feet! Such work was the task for paid servants. So, when he passed by the basin and towel it was just a demonstration of the pride of the rich and privileged man who takes so many common things for granted and presumes that others will do the menial things for him -- the pride that so often comes from having a little money.

He came to James and John. These brothers represented high society. We are told that they were friends, perhaps distant relatives of the High Priest. Of all the disciples, they were the ones who had a claim to social position. According to accepted standards they had a certain amount of rank and position, not very much, mind you, but just enough to make them tilt their noses in the air. So, when they passed by the basin and the towel, it was their pride of privilege and position that made them do it -- the pride which comes when you think you walk in more exalted company than other folk do.

He came to Judas Iscariot. Judas was a hot-blooded Jewish nationalist whose burning passion was the overthrow of the hated Roman invaders. More than any of the others, he wanted a kingdom of power and grandeur. He "carried the purse," we are told (John 13:29), and no doubt had dreams of becoming Secretary of the Treasury in the new Jewish government which

he was certain Jesus would inaugurate. Many commentators believe that when Judas betrayed Jesus into the hands of His enemies, he never believed that Jesus would allow Himself to be put to death. Judas was simply attempting to force Jesus' hand -- to force Him to use His miraculous power to establish an earthly kingdom. Catch Judas washing anybody's feet! -- the pride of the man who is fighting to reach the top and who has time for nothing but his own promotion.

He came to Peter. Why had a man like Peter not noticed the basin and the towel at the door? Well, was he not one of the three of the "Inner Band," and had not Jesus called him "the Rock"? (Matthew 16:18). Surely, he had been given special privileges because of his outstanding spirituality! Was he not virtually Christ's right-hand man? Had he not been promised the keys of the kingdom? Why should he take the towel and the basin? Spiritual pride was Peter's sin -- the pride of the man who thinks he is more devout than the average run of fellow disciples.

Pride of money, pride of privilege, pride of passion, pride of spirit. And Jesus did what none of these proud disciples was prepared to do. That ought to make us think. So often, even in some churches, there is trouble because someone does not get his or her place; although, thank God, I have never seen that happen here at Faith Church. But here is the lesson and the proof that there is only one kind of greatness, and that is the greatness of service. The world is full of people who are standing on their dignity when they ought to be kneeling with towel in hand at the feet of their brothers and sisters. In every sphere of life this desire for prominence and this unwillingness to take a subordinate place wrecks the scheme of things. In any society, it may happen that someone is given a quite unintentional slight and he either explodes in anger or broods and sulks for days afterwards.

When we are tempted, in pride, to think of our dignity, our prestige, our place, our rights, let us see again the picture of the Son of God, girt with a towel, kneeling at His disciples' feet!

Pride is a terrible thing; it is the one sin above all others that blocks the road to Calvary.

It shuts you off from your fellow man. Pride has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began. Other vices may sometimes bring people together; you may find good fellowship among drunken people or unchaste people. But pride always means enmity, because pride is essentially competitive.

As C.S. Lewis puts it, "Each person's pride is in competition with every one 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." Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer or more clever, or better looking than others. It is the comparison that makes you proud, the pleasure of being above the rest.

You remember that ridiculous Pharisee in our Lord's parable who had the audacity to stand in the temple and blurt out this "prayer" - "God, I thank You that I am not like all other men -- robbers, evildoers, adulterers -- or even like this tax collector..." (Luke 18:10,11).

The proud man, even when he has amassed more than he can possibly use, will try to get

still more, just to assert his power. Nearly all of those evils in the world that people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of pride. Competitors do not generally fraternize. That is why pride cuts a person off from his fellow man.

But above all, pride shuts you off from God. In God, you come up against Someone Who is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself; and unless you know God as that, and therefore know yourself as nothing in comparison, you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on people and things; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see Someone Who is above you!

Now what is the best way to deal with pride?

1. Remember who you are. Do you know who you are? You are a lump of clay and in that body of yours there is:

enough fat for seven bars of soap,
enough phosphorus for 2200 match heads,
enough carbon for 9,000 lead pencils,
enough iron for one 3-inch nail,
enough lime to whitewash a hen house,
a small quantity of other materials; and
about ten gallons of water.

And the whole lot is worth, in the drug store, about \$7.00.

Do you realize that you are so vulnerable that a microbe so small that you can see it only under a microscope, can kill you? That's what happened this past week to Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets of "Sesame Street," who died at 53 of bacterial pneumonia.

Remember that you brought nothing into this world, and you can take nothing out. Remember too that God gave you any brains or ability that you possess. The very faith you have in Christ is God's gift to you. You are a sinner for whom Christ died.

“And every virtue we possess, and every victory won,
And every thought of holiness, are His alone!”

Where, then, is there any room for pride?

2. Follow the example of Jesus. “Who, being in very nature God, (nevertheless) humbled Himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6—8), What redeeming humility the Savior displayed!

Rely on the Holy Spirit to make and keep you genuinely humble. Do some of you

remember the old days before we had tubeless tires? There was that red inner tube, and if you had taken it by itself, and put 28 pounds of air pressure into it, it would have burst. The tube by itself just couldn't stand that kind of pressure. But when you put that same tube inside a strong outer tire, the tube could then resist the pressure of even 32 pounds and give you a tire on which your car could ride comfortably.

In and of ourselves, we are liable to burst with pride; but if we surround our life with the power of the Holy Spirit, and the graciousness and humility of Christ our Lord, then pride will never cause your spiritual downfall, for you will be fortified from outside yourself.

Remember, too, that the nearer you live to Christ, the more conscious you will be of your own imperfections, and that should certainly help to keep us humble.

“Those who fain would serve Thee best
Are conscious most of wrong within.”

It was Richard Baxter, the 17th century saintly pastor, who saw a condemned criminal being taken, one day, to his execution, and Baxter exclaimed, “There, but for the grace of God, go I!”

Maintain that spirit of humility and dependence upon God; and pride, the mother of all sins, will never take possession of the citadel of your soul.

AMEN.