

HOSEA NO. 12
February 5th, 1989
The First Deadly Sin

Hosea 12:1-8; 13:1-8

What is the greatest impediment to faith and godliness in your life? What is it, that more than anything else, prevents you from becoming the Christian you ought to be and, I know in the case of most of you, you really so much want to be? What is it that keeps you from that so much larger measure of God's blessing which you long to experience? And what it is that prevents the fulfillment of God's great purposes in your life? I WILL TELL YOU! It is your pride! Augustine described the effects of sin upon human nature by saying that sin caused man to be curved in on himself. He was right and he has in that way described every one of us.

We are proud; we think very well of ourselves; we love ourselves passionately. We cannot bear to have ourselves displaced from the center of our own hearts. And that pride, that worship of ourselves, stands smack in the way of everything right and good and holy in our lives.

We love ourselves so much that it is hard to find room left for a real love for God; certainly not for a love that is greater and more demanding than the love we cherish for ourselves. We think so highly of ourselves that it is constitutionally very difficult for us to trust in the Lord, to depend upon him as we should, because such trusting and such dependence amount, correctly, to a confession that we are poor and needy, that we cannot take care of ourselves. God demands first place in our hearts, of course, he deserves first place in his peoples' hearts, but to be first he must dislodge ourselves from that position and, even as we say that we want to decrease so that he may increase, we cling fiercely to the arm rests of our heart's throne, unwilling to make room for the rightful King.

You may say, 'Oh, No! that isn't my problem. My problem is the very reverse: low self-esteem. I do not; I cannot think as highly about myself as I should and as is healthy and right.' No, you are mistaken. Low self-esteem is simply pride by another name. Such persons are as much devoted worshippers of themselves as those who in their self-confidence walk through the world with heads held high. They too are entirely wrapped up with

themselves; and, indeed, consider their own approval and their own opinion decisive. It is much more important to such folks what *they* think about themselves than what God thinks about them! If that isn't pride; if that isn't breathtaking arrogance, than what is it? C.S. Lewis devotes the fourteenth of his Screwtape Letters to demonstrating how low self-esteem is just pride in another guise.

And it is very simple to demonstrate that this is, in fact, the cursed truth about all of us—that we are very proud, that we love ourselves very much. The proof is before us every day and again and again in the way in which we are so averse to criticism of ourselves. When people criticize us, or when we even suspect that they may be thinking critical thoughts about us, we are offended, we are hurt, we become angry and in our thoughts we wish that person ill for the blasphemy he has committed in speaking against our god!

Each one of us is so proud that even our best friends scarcely dare to tell us what others are saying about us behind our backs. We are so blind to ourselves, we think so much more highly of ourselves than anyone else in the world does and are so deeply and mortally wounded when others speak against us, however truly. WHAT IS THIS BUT PRIDE of the most genuine kind, of self-love carried far beyond reasonable limits?

Well, our problem was Israel's problem too. Indeed, Israel's chief problem, that which was blocking all hope of repentance and salvation for her, was just her so high and so great and so deep pride and love of herself and congratulation of herself. Her chief problem was not idolatry, that was only an aftereffect. She worshipped idols because, worshipping herself chiefly, her spiritual life could only accommodate smallish gods who made no claims upon her absolute loyalty to herself. But the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the living God, demanded, as we read, that Israel acknowledge *no one but Him*, and that 'no one' excluded Israel herself. For her to worship God aright she would have to stop worshipping herself, and this she would not do, so enamored of herself had she become.

This is always what happens when sin has the upper hand. Men, Paul wrote in Romans 1, become 'lovers of themselves instead of lovers of God' and they 'exchange the glory of God for images made to look like man', which is to say, they worship themselves instead of their maker.

Well so it was in Israel in Hosea's day as it is today. But the Lord unmasks Israel's pride through his prophet and warns us never to imitate Israel in her

fundamental and tragic blasphemy; he shows us what this pride is and in so showing us, warns us to stand against it in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones in family and church with all our might.

I. First, he declares that Israel's spiritual pride is plain dishonesty. It is a lie; it is the BIG LIE of Israel's life.

You may remember that it was the insight of Adolph Hitler that if you told little lies, people would see through them; but if you told huge lies, uttered sweeping denials even of what many knew to be true by their own eyes and solemnly and forcefully issued explanations which turned black into white, evil into good and good into evil, large numbers of people would swallow them hook, line, and sinker—either because they wanted them to be true, or because they just couldn't imagine someone lying so blatantly!

Well, pride is humankind's BIG LIE. Ephraim boasted, as we read in 12:8 'I have become wealthy.' She was taking credit for her economic prosperity, for her luxurious lifestyle, for her success.

WHAT A CROCK! It was God's favor she was enjoying; his goodness, his generosity, AND HIS PATIENCE!

Long before, in Deuteronomy, the Lord had warned Israel: 'When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful you do not forget the Lord your God; You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant which he swore to your forefathers.' [6:10-12; 8:17-18]

Well, Israel hadn't remembered; she had completely forgotten and now she was blithely taking credit for someone else's accomplishments! It was a lie, but it was so often repeated and so cordially accepted by everyone, that no one thought to compare it with the facts.

Our pride is *always* brutally dishonest. What do we have, Paul asked, that we have not received; and if we have received it, why do we act as if we had not? Whatever it is that we so much like about ourselves and worship ourselves for, it is God's gift to us.

The Bible often mentions the kinds of things that provoke pride in us: money and possessions as here in Hosea; beauty (Ezekiel 28:17); strength (30:18; 31:10); security (Obadiah 2ff.), and so on. But every one of these things is God's gift to us and, what is more, every one of them he can withdraw and does withdraw at his pleasure. All that money Israel was boasting in was going to lie in Assyrian bank accounts in just a few years time.

We are all of us so easily able to convince ourselves to take credit for God's goodness and generosity and gifts, that nothing short of a real conscience about the dishonesty of this, the lie of it, will suffice to keep us wary of this proud error and on guard against it. We must tell ourselves frequently: 'every good thing has come down from above' and tell God still more frequently 'all that I am I owe to thee.' And we must so pray at table and so identify the source of our good things before our children that they too learn to give credit always where the true credit is due.

Susannah Wesley used to be careful, for example, never to say simply to one of her daughters: 'What beautiful hair you have' but always to say, 'What beautiful hair the Lord has given you.' That is wise and right, for so deep-seated is our pride and our tendency to lie to feed that pride, that nothing short of a constant assault on it with the truth will suffice to break its grip upon our hearts, and the earlier that assault is begun the more likelihood of real victory in the already so proud hearts of our children.

II. Second, pride is not only dishonest, it is ungrateful. It not only takes personal credit for what God has given and done, it in the same way robs God of the gratitude and thanksgiving which his goodness deserves.

This is what Israel did. The Lord fed them in the wilderness and they were satisfied and when they became satisfied they forgot the Lord. They turn God's own generosity to them against Him; they take his gifts, indeed, they sate themselves with his gifts, and then forget all about him, who gave them. **THEY WERE INGRATES.**

Everyone of us, in our own pride, is offended deeply when we give an expensive or beautiful gift to someone and get no thanks or little thanks for it. We think **OUR** gifts are worth the gratitude of the one who receives them.

1. But we get gifts beyond number and wonderful beyond description daily

from the hand of our heavenly Father and never say thank you or even acknowledge his hand reaching down to place his presents before us.

2. This is the inevitable result of pride, the unwillingness to give thanks, because thanks would be an expression of our dependence upon another, and would be a confession that He is greater than we!
3. It is only to be expected that as Paul describes man in his sin and his resultant pride in Romans chapter 1, he goes on to say about men, 'nor were they thankful.'

No! We must stand against this proud ingratitude in our hearts and lives, and practice thanksgiving as one of our highest duties, acknowledging all of God's gifts to us, from another day of life, to the food on our table, to the job with which we earn our living, to the health with which we keep the job, to the families for which we live and work, to the salvation which so enriches our lives and adds to them hope of life eternal.

III. Third, beyond dishonesty and ingratitude, pride is an illusion. It is a deceit which we willingly perpetrate upon ourselves, a con game in which we are the willing marks.

In vv. 9ff of both chapter 12 and chapter 13, the Lord solemnly makes the point and swears that Israel's boasting will be overturned shortly, her money belong to others, her homes and cities lying in ruins, her security a cruel joke as she stumbles off to foreign parts a captive people, destined to work as slaves for her conquerors.

This is the huge tragedy of pride: it is a house of cards in everyone's heart and life. Though we are careful, scrupulously careful not to bump it, the Lord can bring it down with the lightest touch of his finger, and all we boasted of will be gone.

This is true of any particular thing in which we take pride and it is true of our whole lives over which the spectre of death looms with such menace and inevitability.

The God who gives can take away, and the God who gives and whose gifts are not acknowledged, but are rather stolen and claimed as our own, not only can take away, but promises to take away as part of his judgment upon our

proud dishonesty and ingratitude. Ingratitude and pride provokes the Lord to humble: He did so with Hezekiah and with Herod and will do so today.

This, then, is the Lord's warning through Hosea his prophet: pride is dishonesty, it is ingratitude, and it is a hopeless illusion which, indulged in long enough, will certainly be shattered. Pride goeth before a fall!

How do we respond to such a warning this morning, beloved? What ought we to do in answer to Hosea's preaching?

Well, we ought to begin to have the same view of pride that the great prophet had, and ought to begin to despise and fear it as he did. And we ought to seek with all of our heart to put on humility, that true lowliness of spirit which is right for the people of God and healthy for them too.

'The foundation of the Christian life is laid very low' it was once written, and we ought to seek to dig down to relay our foundation lower every day.

To grow in faith and to grow in love for the Lord, we must kill our pride; that is the key! Pascal put it more bluntly: 'Without humility all our other virtues are but vices.'

Do you believe that? The world does not! I have been mesmerized these past days by William Manchester's second large volume on Winston Churchill. It is the story of an unquestionably great man—perhaps the last really great man of our era—and it is a story magnificently told.

He was a man of political genius, as everyone knows, a superb orator with a flashing wit, a gifted writer and painter, a man of prodigious energy and accomplishments, and, humanly speaking, the Savior of democracy. *But Churchill was not a humble man, he was vain.* He loved himself passionately. Charles Simeon the great Anglican minister of another day once instructed himself in his diary: 'Talk not about myself.' Winston Churchill not only never wrote such a thing, he never thought such a thing. He himself once acknowledged that his idea of a fine dinner was to dine well and then discuss a serious topic, 'with myself as chief conversationalist.' He was not a man of prayer because he fully expected to be able to manage things without help from God. He would not beg; when he fell into serious financial misfortune, he asked a friend to beg for him among his wealthy acquaintances. One of his friends, mind you, would later say of Churchill: "'Thou shalt have no other gods but me' has always been the first, and the most significant of his commandments." [p. 374]

Churchill was a great man in certain ways; there is no doubt about it. I commend to you the reading of Manchester's book; you may find yourself as I have staying up late unable to put it down. But remember as you read how differently things are measured here from how they are measured in the kingdom of God.

Churchill was a proud man and his admirers, including Manchester, will say today that his vanity was a small price to pay for saving the world from Hitler. But now, I think, Churchill has a very different view of things if, as I sadly expect, he now faces the same miserable eternal prospect as his erstwhile German adversary.

The Bible's measurement is very different! It considers pride the chief sin and humility the bottom grace. I happened to be reading the other night in my hotel room in Atlanta the 12th chapter of Romans, and because I was working on this sermon, I was immediately struck with the fact that in Paul's first and comprehensive statement of the Christian life, following upon his exposition of the doctrines of grace and salvation in chapters 1-11, he mentions humility four times!

1. 'Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought' in v. 3;
2. 'Honor one another *above yourselves*' in v. 10;
3. 'Do not be proud' in v. 16;
4. And, later in the same verse, as if to drive a most crucial point home to stubborn hearts: 'Do not be conceited.'

Humility is the bedrock of the Pauline doctrine of the Christian life. Our world has no such affection for this grace and does not care to engage in the very hard work required to obtain it. It cares for most everything above humility and, as a result of its influence, even in the church, it is very rare to hear anyone say and clearly mean that he or she is 'content to fill a little space if thou be glorified' or 'In thy kingdom by thy grace, grant me a humble servant's place.'

I have told you before and we have laughed together about the technique Francis of Assisi used to mortify his pride. When people would praise him he commanded one of his friars to do the opposite and to whisper in his

ear every insulting thing he could think to say. And when the friar, though unwilling, called him boorish and mercenary and unskilled and useless, he would reply: ‘May the Lord bless you, my beloved son, for it is you that speaks the very truth and what the son of Peter Bernardone should hear.’

But when you stop to think about how deeply rooted pride is in our hearts, how much we lust after the worship of others, how deeply offended we are even by just criticism, and when you stop to consider how little progress we have made in putting our pride to death since we became Christians and how much it still serves to weaken our faith in Christ and our love for God, perhaps we too might begin to think that only measures as crude and as blatant as that will ever be likely to do the job for us.

When we read that Jean Massillon, the courageous French bishop and magnificent preacher, once replied to a compliment on one of his sermons by saying to the poor person who made it: ‘The Devil has said the same thing to me already, and more eloquently than you,’ we are likely to think that a rather abrupt and unkind response to a well-meant remark. But then, Massillon obtained much more humility than we have, and so who are we to judge the extremity of his methods.

Don’t suppose that half-measures will work for you until you begin finding that genuine humility is taking up its residence in your heretofore so proud heart. Until you can honestly say, in the privacy of your heart and to yourself, what St. Theresa said long ago: ‘. . . I am always very glad that my slanderers should tell a trifling lie about me rather than the whole terrible truth.’

The gospel is designed to destroy our pride and to make us humble before the Lord: it is designed to teach us the magnitude of our unworthiness and the splendor of divine grace and mercy in Jesus Christ; it is designed to make us trust in the Lord only and to acknowledge gladly and thankfully that our lives and our destinies are entirely in his hands. And when the gospel begins to produce that pure humility, that spiritual lowliness in the heart of a man or a woman, then, and only then, is a heart free to give itself away to God, to love him before all else, and only then can a heart really trust in Christ Jesus, counting utterly upon him for everything in this life and the next, because it has learned not to trust itself!

And when the gospel of Christ and the Spirit of God have accomplished *that*, it has brought to pass its most splendid and its rarest achievement.

What will become of our crumbling world? I do not know; the prospect profoundly depresses me. But I say this: whatever may be our lot or that of our children in this world gone so far away from God and now so addicted to its pride and arrogance, whatever may become of human society in the future, then as well as now, there lies before us the grand prospect of making of our lives something marvelously beautiful, fine, and strong, something that would tower above the rubble all around us. For what this world cannot achieve, the gospel can; what man cannot create, the grace of God warmly grasped can; what worldly men and women have no heart to do, the Spirit of God and an earnest Christian soul together can: the making of a truly humble man or woman who, freed by his humility to love God with a whole heart, covers with that humble love a multitude of sins, his own and others, and freed by his humility to trust Christ implicitly, by that faith moves mountains.

But oh, what a price must be paid by the man or woman who would kill his pride: what a price in the constant watching of his lying heart to speak against its lies; what a price in the constant giving of thanks to God for what the heart would take credit for itself; and what a price in unmasking the illusions which proud and deceitful hearts are ever indulging. But then, what a life you will have lived, what a spectacular achievement, what a breathtaking display of divine grace and power would your life be if before you left this world it could be said of you: there goes a humble man, there goes a humble woman. There are so few, and genuine Christian humility is so beautiful a thing, it would be an epoch in the life of many people just to meet and know you.

The world esteems Winston Churchill; but God says in Isaiah: ‘This is the one *I* esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my word.’