

## THE SIN OF PRIDE AND CULTIVATING HUMILITY

Adopted from Rami Shapiro's important book called "Recovery – The Sacred Art: The Twelve Steps as Spiritual Practice"

The listing of sins in Christianity goes back at least to the fourth-century monk Evagrius Ponticus, who listed eight evil thoughts central to sin: gluttony, lust, avarice (extreme greed for wealth), sorrow, anger, spiritual lethargy (lack of energy, which later became called sloth), vainglory (boastfulness or extreme vanity), and pride. A student of Evagrius, John Cassian, held that each sin was caused by the one before it, and Pope Gregory the Great (540-604), adhering to Cassian's cascading sin theory, reordered the sins so that PRIDE, which according to Gregory was the cause of all other sin, was in a category all its own. He then added ENVY to Evagrius's list and merged SPIRITUAL LETHARGY with SORROW to get his final list of what is now called the Seven Deadly Sins. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) reaffirmed the centrality of pride, calling it the "head" of all sins.

In his masterful study of the Seven Deadly Sins, Solomon Schimmel writes:

"It is not difficult to see how pride leads to the other sins. The arrogant person who thinks so highly of himself believes himself entitled to what his heart desires, whether in a social or in the material sphere. Since he expects to get his way he is easily angered when he doesn't receive it. Assuming himself superior to others, he is especially prone to envy, which is a response to threats to one's self-esteem. Being self-satisfied, the proud person does not feel compelled to activate himself in the pursuit of spiritual goals, and so commits the sin of sloth. Believing his "eminence" (superiority) to be an entitlement, he will easily trample over the rights of others, as is so frequently done by the greedy, the gluttonous, and the lustful. It is not that pride inevitably leads to these vices, or that all manifestations of these vices are effects of pride. However, since these are frequently the case, Gregory accords pride a separate status designating it the mother and Queen of all vices."

Given the notion that pride is the one sin that causes all others, we will focus on pride specifically. Among the many Christian writers who focus on pride, C.S. Lewis is among the best. Lewis has said that, "Pride is the essential vice, the utmost evil. Other sins are 'fleabites' in comparison to pride. Pride is the way that the devil became the devil. Pride is the complete anti-God state of mind."

Lewis devotes an entire chapter to pride in his book "Mere Christianity". He calls pride the "Great Sin":

"Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind...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 oar in, or patronize me, or show off?" The point is that each person's pride is in competition with every one else's pride."

Asking Lewis's question is an excellent way to take a close look at yourself regarding pride, and realizing the competitive nature of pride helps us focus on the motivation behind pride: the need to be one-up on someone – everyone.

C.S. Lewis continues:

"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 cleverer, or better looking than others. If everyone else 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 has gone, pride has gone."

People who suffer from pride suffer from a deep contraction of the spirit. Their worldview is defined by scarcity, and they live life as a zero-sum game: Winner takes all. Dr. Valerie Goode has said that, "The prideful seem inflated and come off as having an overabundance of self-esteem. But, in fact, the exact opposite is true. They are deflated. They live in a tiny world where they are forever in fear of losing what little they have. So they focus not so much on getting more, but on making sure others get less."

Pride can mask a deep self-loathing, and it is this aspect of pride that is sometimes evident at Twelve Step meetings as people tell their stories. The idea is that if we cannot excel at excellence, we will excel at depravity. What the addict fears most is being ordinary.

We only take pride in that which we can claim to have accomplished. Pride is about power rather than luck, and Lewis's linking pride with competition further links it with power. The proud take pride in their ability to control their lives. They see themselves as powerful, bigger than life. This is true even in Twelve Step meetings where everything depends on admitting our powerlessness. The most difficult aspect of recovery is this admission of powerlessness and that is because it demands a letting go of pride.

C.S. Lewis continues:

"The proud person, even when they have got more than they can possibly want, will try to get still more just to assert their power. Nearly all those evils in the world which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of pride...Power is what pride really enjoys."

Lewis argues that pride separates us from God and is the greatest source of antagonism between people. "As long as you are proud," he says, "you cannot know God." But the real link between C.S. Lewis, pride, and Twelve Step recovery is his notion that pride is a "spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense." The madness that so many people discover in their lives prior to working the Steps illustrates the lack of common sense that power, even the illusion of power, creates.

How do we become free from pride? By continually recognizing our powerlessness, for powerlessness cultivates humility and humility is the antidote to pride. As C.S. Lewis writes, "If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell you the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least nothing whatever can be done before it."

In Step Seven of AA's 12 & 12, it says this about humility:

"Since this Step so specifically concerns itself with humility, we should pause here to consider what humility is and what the practice of it can mean to us.

"Indeed, the attainment of greater humility is the foundation principle of each of A.A.'s Twelve Steps. For without some degree of humility, no alcoholic can stay sober at all. Nearly all A.A.'s have found, too, that unless they develop much more of this precious quality than may be required just for sobriety, they still haven't much chance of becoming truly happy. Without it, they cannot live to much useful purpose, or, in adversity, be able to summon the faith that can meet any emergency...As long as we placed self-reliance first, a genuine reliance upon a Higher Power was out of the question. That basic ingredient of all humility, a desire to seek and do God's will, was missing.

"For us, the process of gaining a new perspective was unbelievably painful. It was only by repeated humiliations that we were forced to learn something about humility. It was only at the end of a long road, marked by successive defeats and humiliations, and the final crushing of our self-sufficiency, that we began to feel humility as something more than a condition of groveling despair. Every newcomer in Alcoholics Anonymous is told, and soon realizes for himself, that his humble admission of powerlessness over alcohol is his first step toward liberation from its paralyzing grip.

"So it is that we first see humility as a necessity. But this is the barest beginning. To get completely away from our aversion to the idea of being humble, to gain a vision of humility as the avenue to true freedom of the human spirit, to be willing to work for humility as something to be desired for itself, takes most of us a long, long time. A whole lifetime geared to self-centeredness cannot be set in reverse all at once. Rebellion dogs our every step at first...We may still have no very high opinion of humility as a desirable personal virtue, but we do recognize it as a necessary aid to our survival.

"Then, in A.A., we looked and listened. Everywhere we saw failure and misery transformed by humility into priceless assets. We heard story after story of how humility had brought strength out of weakness. In every case, pain had been the price of admission into a new life. But this admission price had purchased more than we expected. It brought a measure of humility, which we soon discovered to be a healer of pain. We began to fear pain less, and desire humility more than ever.

"During this process of learning more about humility, the most profound result of all was the change in our attitude toward God. And this was true whether we had been believers or unbelievers. We began to get over the idea that the Higher Power was a sort of bush-league pinch hitter, to be called upon only in an emergency. The notion that we would still live our own lives, God helping a little now and then, began to evaporate. Many of us who had thought ourselves religious awoke to the limitations of this attitude. Refusing to place God first, we had deprived ourselves of His help. But now the words 'Of myself I am nothing, the Father doeth the works' began to carry bright promise and meaning.

"We saw we needn't always be bludgeoned and beaten into humility. It could come quite as much from our voluntary reaching for it as it could from unrelenting suffering. A great turning point in our lives came when we sought for humility as something we really wanted, rather than as something we must have. It marked the time when we could commence to see the full implication of Step Seven: 'Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.'

"The Seventh Step is where we make the change in our attitude which permits us, with humility as our guide, to move out from ourselves toward others and toward God. The whole emphasis of Step Seven is on humility. It is really saying to us that we now ought to be willing to try humility in seeking the removal of our other shortcomings just as we did when we admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, and came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. If that degree of humility could enable us to find the grace by which such a deadly obsession could be banished, then there must be hope of the same result respecting any other problem we could possibly have."

None of the people mentioned so far give much guidance on how to become more humble but guidance for cultivating humility can be found in the Seventh Chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict, the Italian monk Benedict of Nursia (480-545) who was central to the creation of Christian monastic life. Joan Chittister, who has written two books about the Rule of St. Benedict, defines humility this way:

"Humility is simply a basic awareness of my relationship to the world and my connectedness to all its circumstances. It is the acceptance of relationship with others, not only for who they are but also for who I am. Humility is not a false rejection of God's gifts but the acknowledgement that I have been given them for others. Humility is the total continuing surrender to God's power in my life and in the lives of those around me."

In his writings, St. Benedict outlines twelve steps for cultivating humility. They have been reworked and simplified here to speak more directly to those of us working the sacred path of recovery:

- 1) Be aware of God's presence always. Remind yourself that if God is everywhere, God is present as everyone. Each encounter is an encounter with God, demanding your utmost respect and attention.
- 2) Place God's Will above your own. What is your will? To control life to your own advantage, or, when you realize this is impossible, to blind yourself to your powerlessness with addictive behaviors. What is God's Will? To liberate you from the places in which you are enslaved. Doing God's Will is freeing yourself and helping to free others as well.
- 3) Seek guidance only from those who have your best interests at heart, those who support your liberation from the illusion of power and the addictions it carries with it.
- 4) Be patient and still in the face of difficulties and contradictions, and even personal injustice; respond not from a sense of injured pride or frustrated will, but from a place of objective calm and mindful tranquility.
- 5) Recognize when evil thoughts arise in your heart; see them for what they are: the chains of enslavement; and release them by confessing your dark thoughts and secret sins to a trusted confidant. As the Twelve Step proverb puts it, "We are only as sick as our secrets."
- 6) Be content with whatever life brings you, seeing nothing as reward or punishment, and everything as an opportunity to deepen your capacity for humility and the liberation humility brings.
- 7) Consider yourself lower than others, not in hopes that "the last shall be first: (Matthew 20:16) but in order to help lift the other toward freedom.
- 8) Do nothing that serves you alone; make all your deeds of benefit to others and the community.
- 9) Discipline your speech and strengthen your capacity for silence.
- 10) Avoid silliness, mockery, and playing the fool.
- 11) Speak gently and forthrightly, and avoid the fog of words that comes with speech that is designed to deceive.
- 12) Keep your heart humble and your appearance simple, engaging each moment as an opportunity to release fear and the need to control.