

We face some serious problems as a nation. Seven serious problems to be exact, seven vices that plague our country and disturb the peace. Drugs, domestic abuse, homelessness, income inequality, immigration, racial division and political chaos? That's a pretty good list but those are merely seven symptoms of much deeper problems. The seven greatest threats to this nation are: vainglory, envy, anger, greed, lust, laziness and gluttony. These vices are the root of all the bitter fruit that is setting our teeth on edge these days. Tired of the political chaos in our country? It will not change until we address the issue of pride. If you are sick of all the violence, domestic violence, violence against police, violence against those detained by police, violence in our inner cities, then you will have to address the issue of anger. Want a stable, healthy economy? Well we can't have it, not until we are willing to confront greed. Until we are willing to go after the root of the problem, we will be forever condemned to applying band aids to malignant cancer.

These seven root problems have a long history. They are what has been called "the seven deadly sins" going all the way back to the fourth century. These vices, along with their corresponding virtues, served as a means of self-examination in various writings and manuals for centuries. Thoughtful Christians who have gone before us realized there are certain patterns in a fallen world leading to a moral sickness that impacts society in negative ways. Knowing these behaviors enables us to identify specific sins rather than confessing our sins generically. Combating these seven vices is a little like treating cancer. If you have cancer, a generic dose of chemo might do you some good but targeting specific cancers with specific forms of treatment is far more effective. If we can identify our own vices more specifically we will be able to treat them, and defeat them, by pursuing specific virtues.

What is a vice? A vice is simply the disordered pursuit of a good thing. The problem is not with our desires but how we go about satisfying those desires. When G. K. Chesterton says, "Every man who goes into a brothel is looking for God," he is not saying brothels are good. He is saying that the pursuit of intimacy with a stranger is an improper substitute for the satisfaction of intimacy with God.

A vice is not something we are born with like an outgoing personality or a predisposition to high cholesterol. It is a habit acquired over time and supported by a proud culture living independent from God. Over time vices becomes character traits. Acquiring vices and virtues is sort of like making a toboggan run you may have created some place other than Texas during a snowy winter. The first run down is tough sledding, literally. But gradually, through repeated effort, the track is packed down so smoothly that you can glide down the mountain without even

steering. You are in the groove or negatively, you are in a rut. We can cultivate habits or break them down over time through the hard work of spiritual formation.

What are virtues? Virtues are essentially the building blocks of the Christian life. Virtues are "excellencies" of character. Our calling as the people of God is to pursue and promote virtue. Peter says it this way, "You are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." 1 Pe. 2:9

The seven deadly sins pose the greatest threats to the life God blesses. That's why we are warned in scripture to "put off" the old nature built on a shaky foundation of vice and "put on" the new nature which is built on a solid foundation of virtue. Eph. 4:22-24 says, "In reference to your former manner of life, (you) lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth."

The apostle Paul goes even further in Col. 3:5-14...Consider the members of your body as dead to the vices and alive to the character of Christ. Death and resurrection, that's the rhythm of the Christian life. We must die to ourselves daily in order to be renewed and raised up to new life in Christ. This process is the means by which we are transformed in our thinking and behaving as we are conformed more and more to the image of Christ. The vices put a face on what exactly we are to die to. The virtues are aspirational human qualities that help us visualize how we can "put on Christ." So, over the next seven weeks we are going to consider the seven deadly sins and the virtues that counteract them.

Warning: This study will be a dangerous for two reasons:

1. The danger of moral hypocrisy. It is not uncommon among Christians to pursue a form of behavior modification that does not require God's grace just a healthy dose of will power. We are tempted, especially in church circles, to appear better than we are so we conform externally while we remain unchanged internally. Jesus often confronted this temptation in the strongest terms. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." Mt. 6:1

He confronted the Pharisees with, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." Mt. 23:27-28. God hates hypocrisy.

2. The danger of moral hypochondria. Those who are sensitive to their own fallen condition may find themselves guilty of a new sin every day. This can lead to defeat in our walk with Christ. As we work our way through this series I want to emphasize the God-given resource we have been given to defeat the seven deadly sins - the Holy Spirit. We can put all these vices to death if we are followers of Jesus being led by the Spirit of God. "If you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." Ro. 8:13-14. You can kill sin by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So let's get started. This morning I want to take up the first of the seven deadly sins - vainglory. Vainglory may not be a very common word in our culture but it is a very common vice. If you're my age, you know that vainglory was the theme of a popular song by Carly Simon inspired by actor Warren Beatty. "You're so vain - you probly think this song is about you." Not only did Carly Simon reduce the number of syllables in "probably," she also reduced the word vainglory to vain.

As the song implies, vainglory is the excessive and disordered desire for recognition and approval from others. Acceptance is a God-given desire that is polluted and perverted. There is a deep part of us that longs to be approved of and acknowledged. God made us that way. But we seek the satisfaction of that desire in the wrong ways, in the wrong places, from the wrong people.

Have you ever exaggerated something you have done or made something up to impress others? Have you ever said something false about someone else because you thought others would think you were funny? Have you ever done something good in hopes that others would notice? Have you ever been disappointed after doing something good that others did not notice? Moms, have you ever gotten your back up because someone asked, "Do you work or do you just stay at home with the kids?" Men, have you ever blamed your boss for your mistakes in order to gain the acceptance of your coworkers? If you answered "yes" to any of these then you are familiar with vainglory. Garrison Keillor confesses, "I lust after recognition, I

am eager to win all the little merit badges and trinkets of my profession and I am of less real use in this world than any good cleaning lady."

Vainglory is often confused with pride. It is interesting that pride was not considered one of the seven deadly sins because it was considered the source of all sin. Pride is the desire for my own glory over the surpassing value of God's glory. Mark Buchanan says, "Pride usurps God. Pride inverts the universe's deepest truth: that we need and serve God. Pride gets this exactly backward." Vainglory, on the other hand, is the desire for recognition and applause. The vain are all about the show. For the vain, image is everything. Vainglory is a vice that offers a quick and fleeting high instead of the lasting and substantial virtue.

To be acknowledged and approved of is a basic human need. But in this selfie kingdom of ours, Youtube, Facebook and Snapchat make it easier than ever to seek the approval of others. We are a culture that loves to watch ourselves. We can't get enough of ourselves. Have you ever read a Facebook post about someone who failed miserably? You won't see many "bad hair days" on Facebook.

The greatest danger of vainglory is that in seeking our own glory we fail to give glory to God. That is a fatal mistake. God warns, "I am the Lord, that is My name. I will not give My glory to another nor My praise to graven images." Is. 42:8.

The pursuit of your own glory over the glory of God has severe consequences. Augustine in *The City of God* describes the Roman Empire this way: "Glory they most ardently loved: for it they wished to live, for it they did not hesitate to die." Now you know why Rome did not survive - they sought their own glory and failed to give glory to the one, true God. By contrast the famous composer, Johan Sebastian Bach, who wrote the exquisite concertos he named after me, the Brandenburg Concertos (that's an example of vainglory), wrote on every manuscript, *solī deo gloria*, glory to God alone. When we recognize beauty, when we use our gifts well, when we are involved in some great cause with other people and we give glory to God, we can put vainglory to death.

How can we pursue the "excellencies (or virtues) of Christ" and put to death the vices that pose such a threat to our spiritual and national wellbeing?

1. First and foremost, accept the love of God. The beauty of the gospel is that God knows all about us and loves us anyway. Because God knows me and loves me infinitely I can give up my reputation-seeking. God promises to fill the deep desire to be known and accepted with unconditional love.

2. Confess your sin. Confession is an important part of building a love relationship with God. Think of it this way, love flourishes in the openness and vulnerability of marriage not in the best-face-forward game of dating. Be honest before God. Ask yourself, "Is my greatest joy God's greatness or my greatness? Am I more interested in praising Him or in being praised? Do I really want to see God or do I want to be God?" One of the saddest verses in the whole Bible is found in John 12:42-43, "Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God."

3. Give glory to God. Jesus connected the ability to believe with the willingness to glorify God, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the *one and only* God?" Jn. 5:44. How do we seek God's glory? It begins with worship. "God calls us to pray and think and dream and plan and work not to be made much of, but to make much of Him in every part of our lives." Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, p. 37. Life is wasted when we do not live for the glory of God.

Worship is an act of humility and humility is the antidote for vainglory. When I worship I admit that I am not the center of the universe. When I pray I acknowledge my dependence upon God. It is the humble publican and not the hypocritical Pharisee who receives forgiveness.

So this week, worship in solitude. Be still. Stillness and solitude remove the audience we are trying to impress. We are face to face with an audience of One. We can turn off the voices that constantly tell us to seek recognition and hear the only voice that ultimately matters.