

9 March 2011
Zion Lutheran Church, Beecher, IL
Ash Wednesday
From Rev. Ken Behnken's sermon series on the seven deadly sins.

1. The Deadly Sin of Pride – Romans 6:23 (*Ash Wednesday*)

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Who talks about sin anymore? Who talks about what is right and wrong before God? Think about it: as a society, we don't talk about "sin." We don't talk about virtues—traits that are good in and of themselves. Instead, we talk about "values." This subtle shift in language marks a MAJOR move in ethics and morality. A virtue is a characteristic that is good. For everyone, always. It is good because God declares it good. A virtuous person is honest, faithful, kind, compassionate, diligent, patient, content, etc. These are virtues before the Lord; they are good qualities because He made them good.

A "value," on the other hand, is ambiguous. It is good for you only if it is important to you. It is good not because God made it that way; it is good because it means something to you. Do you value honesty? Then be honest. If you don't value it, then don't worry about it. And don't worry about what God thinks of lying. Do you value money? Then be greedy—and don't bother worrying what the Lord might think about that! Looking at morality in terms of "values" means determining for yourself what is good and right. Where does this leave God? He no longer has a say in what is right and wrong; sin is no longer a relevant term.

Such an approach to morality is DANGEROUS. It downplays sin by labeling bad things as mistakes or flaws or failures. Then they don't sound so bad—and that's the point. Sin is downplayed so that we can decide for ourselves what is right or wrong. Be careful! No good comes from downplaying sin. NONE. Compare it to a bottle of poison. The poison causes

death. Such a bottle is clearly labeled with warnings that it contains poison: if ingested, it will kill you. Think how dangerous it would be to peel off the warning labels, peel off the poison stickers, and label the bottle: fruit juice. Changing the label does not make the contents less poisonous: they will kill just as quickly. But changing the label invites someone to drink of it, rather than warn them of the dangers. The same thing happens when we downplay sin. Changing the name does not make sin less poisonous. It leads to death, whether we call it sin or mistakes or failures. Changing the name only makes it easier for someone to fall into sin.

This Lent our sermons will strive to remind us that sin is sin. Its wages is death. May we recognize this and turn from sin! These sermons will also point us to God's answer for sin: the life-giving grace found in His Son, Christ Jesus. Each week we will look at one of the seven deadly sins. This list of seven sins will remind us what makes sin so deadly and dangerous.

The list of seven deadly sins is ancient—first assembled in the sixth century by a father of the church, Gregory. There is no scriptural list of these seven sins. Our Lord has not labeled them as the seven deadly sins. Rather, this is the wisdom of the church for centuries; wisdom that points out that these particular sins are dangerous and deadly. What are these seven sins? You might be surprised. Murder is not on the list. Neither is stealing, or kidnapping, or abuse. These great and obvious sins do not make the list. This is not a list of the seven worst things you can do. It is a list of seven of the most dangerous sins. They are dangerous not because of how bad they are. They are dangerous because they are deceptive. They do not seem that bad. That makes them deadly: they can slip in before we have realized that they are sinful and harmful to us. They are deadly because they are the root of other sins. Gregory, their author, wrote that all sins could be filed underneath one of these seven main sins, for they arise from them. The seven deadly sins are pride, impurity, envy, gluttony, slothfulness, avarice, (that is, greed), and anger.

Interesting list, is it not? Impurity, envy, anger: we recognize these as sins. Slothfulness, laziness, and gluttony? What's wrong with being a little lazy or enjoying life too much? We'll consider those questions in the weeks ahead. Same with greed—yes, greed is a sin, and a root of many other sins. Tonight we consider pride. What's wrong with pride? How can this be a deadly sin when murder does not make the list?

Pride comes first in the deadly progression of sin – and so it is first in our consideration. Proverbs says, ***"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."*** Pride is the moral condition and mental attitude that precedes other sins. It prompts us to love ourselves above our fellow-man, love ourselves also above our brothers and sisters in Christ, and love ourselves even above God himself.

The pride that God hates is not the healthy self-respect or the sense of personal integrity that comes to us as children of God. It is the unrealistic and undue self-esteem that we might have out of all proportion to who and what we are. One man said, "At its core, pride leads people to swagger before other people and to strut before God." The Lord shows how he feels about it in Proverbs, ***"I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech."***

Pride may take many forms, but all flow from the haughty human heart that puts itself at the center of its universe. Spiritual pride, the first – and the seed bed for all the others – is one of the first causes of human sin.

Spiritual pride was behind the fall of Lucifer or the devil. It was then conceived in the hearts of Adam and Eve as the devil suggested to them that God was not being honest with them in restricting them from eating of the tree of ***"knowledge of good and evil"***. Instead of dying, as God had warned, the tempter told them they would ***"become as gods"*** – free to determine for themselves what would be good and what would be evil in their lives. For the first time sin was

misleading and downplayed. Suddenly the tree to be avoided became *"a delight to the eyes, something to be desired to make one wise"*. Adam and Eve fell into pride: thinking they knew better than God; eating that they might be made like Him. They ate the forbidden fruit of willful sin, and when sin was full grown in them it gave birth to death. They were distanced from each other; they knew their sin had separated them from their Creator; and the germ of physical death became a continual reminder of what they had lost.

In his *Letter to the Romans* St. Paul later analyzed what happened to us and to all people as a result: *"Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death came to all men, because all sinned."* We now are part of a sinful humanity, predisposed in our sinfulness to the proud desire to choose our own way instead of God's Way. We share Adam's experience – separated from God, distanced from each other, facing the fact that our earthly lives will come to an end at some point. In some, this pervasive, deadly, sinful pride asserts itself to the point where they reject God's very existence and claim to be "masters of their own fate, captains of their own souls". It is expressed in others in their fashioning gods out of their own imaginations or their own reasoning. Still others become so preoccupied with their own pursuits in life that they don't give God a thought – and use his name only occasionally as a careless exclamation.

When we face up to the truth of our sinfulness and our sinning we readily acknowledge that *"the wages of sin – also the sin of pride – is death."* We can only say with Paul, *"Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* But we can continue with him: *"Thanks be to God!"* – for we know that *"the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"*. God's grace in Christ can rescue us even from spiritual pride – and he has done that. He has reached out to us with the Good News of Jesus Christ. We have been blessed to know and believe that Jesus

Christ is God's Son, our Savior. We now want to walk in his Way. But, because we still carry around our sinful nature, it is only in the continuing power of the Holy Spirit that we may continually deal with that sinful nature. Paul urges all Christians: ***"Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its sinful desires. Be made new in the attitude of your minds, and put on the new self, which is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."*** In that very urging is the Spirit's renewing power, for ***"God is at work in us to will and to act according to his good purpose."*** Know for sure, then, that the renewing power of the Holy Spirit is here for you now through God's Word and the Holy Sacraments – and will be there for you day by day.

Spiritual pride troubles our relationship with God – but its offspring trouble also our relationship with other people. Spiritual pride may lead to intellectual pride in our life—looking down on those whom we consider uneducated or less knowledgeable than we are. It may lead to social pride—looking down on those who are different than we are, forgetting we are all God's children. It may lead to material pride—looking down on those who have less than we do, boasting of our wealth in the things of this world. These forms of pride are sinful as well; may we never look down on our brothers and sisters! May pride never stand between us and those neighbors whom the Lord sends to us that we might love them!

Human pride is a deadly sin! How thankful we must be that the One who could rightly be proud of his person and position as the only-begotten Son of the Father ***"made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, and humbled himself even to death on the cross"*** – for us! It is he who invites you and me this evening not only to receive again his forgiving love but also to ***"take his yoke on us and learn from him, for he is gentle and humble in heart."*** And he tells us that in so doing we will find ***"rest for our souls"*** in our continuing struggle with the deadly sin of pride.