

In the first century, tax collectors were considered the dregs of society. Taxation in the far-flung Roman Empire was not regulated by a system of fair and agreed-upon rates. Rome wanted to wring as much money from their conquered people as possible. Those who collected taxes were not ATO-type civil servants struggling with an unpopular, demanding, and difficult responsibility. Tax collectors got their jobs by promising to collect more money for Rome than others who had bid on the job. The local citizens hated tax collectors because they were considered lackeys of the Romans and oppressors of their own people. The Romans didn't trust them because they fit a stereotype of lying, stealing, conniving cheats. Jesus' first-century audience did not expect him to say anything positive about a tax collector.

On the other hand, Pharisees were esteemed religious elders. They may or may not have been particularly popular, but they were highly regarded because they were serious about their religious faith and practice. The most reported flaw in these pious, morally straight people was that they believed too strongly in their flattering press clippings. The public considered them serious and devout people but the Pharisees thought much more highly of themselves as the arbiters of what was right and what was wrong. Consequently, in addition to piety, the Pharisees had an equally deserved reputation for being overbearing, pompous, arrogant, know-it-alls. Today we would be reluctant to invite a Pharisee to dinner lest he suck the available oxygen from the room.

That, of course, is the theme of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who go to the temple to pray. Because the Pharisee wants to be certain that everyone has the opportunity to see and hear him, he makes a grand noticeable entrance; stands away from the crowd, yet within sight and hearing of a newly arrived busload of tourists from rural Galilee. He wears the robes and finery that identify him as a Pharisee.

Have you ever seen the T shirt which says "God Loves You..... But I'm his favourite...." "I thank you God that I am better than the thieves, rogues, adulterers, and garden variety riff-raff who gather here on Temple Mount. I am confident that I believe all the right things and I try to be over the top in doing the right things. The Law requires I occasionally fast, but I fast every day. By my behaviour I send a message on how to be pious and faithful. I really don't mind this extra responsibility. In fact, I rejoice in being better than others. Lord, I appreciate you making me nearly perfect. Especially, I want to thank you that I am not like that tax collector standing over there in the shadows."

The tax collector is off by himself. He is too embarrassed by his behaviour to lift his face to the heavens. With downcast eyes, he mumbles, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (v. 13b).

Jesus concludes the story by saying the tax collector went home justified that day and not the Pharisee. As Jesus puts it, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 14). This particular day, in that particular way, in the eyes of God, the behaviour of the tax collector was superior to the behaviour of the Pharisee.

Don't read too much into that. The tax collector's humility did not make him the story's hero. His prayerful confession did not transform him into an ideal citizen and person of abiding faith. The tax collector was simply a lying, conniving, cheat who happened to have had an insight into what he was really like. The peripheral message from this story touches the righteousness of the tax collector. The story's centre of meaning focuses on the flaw in the Pharisee, that is, his pride. The Pharisee had a massive, untreated infestation of pride and entitlement. Pride is one of those sins that lead to other

forms of sinning. For that reason, pride ranks at the top of the list of *Seven Deadly Sins*. Not only is pride destructive of persons and relationships, it leads to other forms of destructive behaviour. Like a noxious weed in the garden, pride grows, spreads, and chokes out the best in life.

Pride has an insidious quality. It germinates a healthy self-confidence. Then, if left to grow, unchecked and unexamined, it spreads and transforms into the worship of self. In doing so, pride masks reality. No matter how capable we might become, we remain mortals, subject to all the faults and frailties of humanity. Pride deludes us into thinking we are arbiters of what is right, what is good what is ethical.

Pride is a temptation for powerful world leaders, but it also tempts the ordinary of everyday life. Pride can grow like a cancer in our lives and keeps us from getting the help we need. When asked what part we have played in a difficulty we say such things as: "I have done nothing wrong." "I don't need advice I know what is best." "I am right, I am justified to say what I like."

As the "root of all sin," this growing, noxious weed undermines and ruins relationships by hindering the infested from being open and honest. Pride not only hinders us from being open and honest, it damages the lives of those around us. Sometimes that happens when parents try to live out their lives through their children. Sometimes we become so full of bile that we deliberately contribute to the destruction of the something or someone we claim to love.

Pride further undermines our relationships by making reconciliation more difficult. Because we are human, there are always ups and downs, pitfalls and pratfalls. Our humanness ensures a frequent need to forgive one another. But when we are filled with pride, we believe that we are incapable of doing wrong and others are inferior to us. That makes it very difficult to forgive. Hurt and anger grow unabated until they choke the very joy out of ourselves and others near to us. We get so caught in our moral "rightness" we take "pride" in condemning and judging other people of the lesser *6 Deadly Sins* whilst displaying full blown infestation of the pre-eminent sin of pride.

The most common danger of pride, however, is that it makes us vulnerable to temptation. Pride insists "I could never do that." Unfortunately, the moment we think we are incapable is the moment we are the most susceptible.

Every Sunday morning, well-educated, well-intentioned, hard working, moral people come to church without giving much thought to the fact that assertive self-confidence and success make a near perfect conditions for the cancer of pride to establish, take root, and grow. The very moment we believe ourselves incapable of being tempted is the moment we are most vulnerable.

Two people went up the temple to pray. The prayers of each were answered. The first told God how good he was. He asked for nothing and that is what he received. The other was deeply aware of his sin and he cried out for mercy. And mercy was given him just for the asking.

Every one of us is free to go and do likewise. While asking for and receiving nothing, we can tell God and the entire world how good we are and how inadequate, immoral and unethical others are. Or we can admit our shortcomings, look for God's grace, and be given the mercy to be strengthened, uplifted, and forgiven. The choice is ours. And thanks be to God for that. Amen and Amen.

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