

Everybody Acts Medium

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Genesis 2:15-17;
3:1-5

Sermon Series:
Seven Deadly
Sins/Lively Virtues

*It is pride that
changes
angels into
devils.*

C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*:
“There is one vice of which no one in the world is free, which everyone in the world loathes when they see it in others, and of which hardly any people...ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice....There is no fault which makes us more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit, and the virtue opposite to it, called humility....The essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”

Pope Gregory, in 590 AD, compiled a list of Seven Deadly Sins. He called them deadly since he regarded these sins as

particularly lethal to the human soul. He distilled his list of killer sins from a 4th century compilation of eight evil thoughts assembled by Egyptian monks. Sherwood Schwartz, who created the TV show Gilligan’s Island, patterned his leading characters after the Seven Deadly Sins. The movie *Se7en* from a few years back featured Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman as police detectives trying to solve a series of murders that correspond to the seven deadly sins.

Pride appears first on Gregory’s list. He considered pride as the queen of all vices. He’s in good company with such assessment. Dante called pride the chief of all sins. Augustine described it as the root of all sins. St. Aquinas described pride as “the first sin, the source of all other sins and the worst sin.”

The fall of Satan is attributed to pride. The angel Lucifer desired to become like God. We read in Isaiah how Lucifer entertained in his heart, “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God...I will be like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:13-14). It is pride that changes angels into devils.

God tells Adam and Eve they are free to eat from any

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tree in the garden, except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). Why did God put the forbidden tree in the garden if he didn't want people to eat from it? Maybe this tree is there to remind them that they aren't God. There are limits to what you can do as humans. You can do lots of things on God's good earth, but you can't be God. Only God can be God.

The serpent slithers up to Eve, in chapter 3, to ask a question. We're not told why this serpent approaches Eve rather than Adam. Some claim it's because she is the weaker sex; others insist she is the one in charge of the situation. Eve doesn't register surprise at a talking snake. Perhaps animals and people talked with each other in paradise.

The identity of this serpent is not revealed. The Apostle John refers to Satan in Revelation as that ancient serpent (12:9). This smooth operator asks a seemingly innocent question: "Did God *really* say you must not eat from any tree in the garden (Genesis 3:1)?"

There's no mention that this fruit is an apple. Most likely the correlation between the Latin words for evil (*malus*) and apple (*malum*) created the confusion.

The serpent succeeds in planting seeds of doubt in Eve's head. Did God really say that? Instead of focusing on God's gracious provision of all the other fruit trees in the

garden, the serpent exploits this single restriction. He wildly exaggerates the prohibition, making it appear unreasonable and restrictive. The serpent's question casts God in a negative light. Maybe God is being too restrictive. If God really loved you, would He limit you this way?

Eve is quick to correct the serpent: "We may eat of the fruit from the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die' (3:2-3). In her zeal to correct the serpent's distortion, Eve goes a little too far. God never said anything about touching the fruit. It may seem like an innocent embellishment, but it paves the way for the serpent's next move. "You will not die." Can't you picture his feigned expression of surprise? "For God knows when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (3:4-5).

The temptation to become Godlike proves irresistible. Within a span of one verse, we are told that "she took...and ate; she gave...and he ate." Adam doesn't say a word. He doesn't register a single word of hesitation. If Eve's sin is the sin of initiation, Adam's is the sin of acquiescence.

Our spiritual forebears are right. The first sin is pride. Pride is the mother of all sins.

...nobody acts small, nobody acts big, everybody acts medium.

Pride has evolved into a positive word in our day. We talk in terms of being proud of who you are or taking pride in your work. This kind of pride has more to do with dignity and respect. The sin of pride is altogether different. The sin of pride is self-absorption. Proud people become intoxicated with themselves. It's ironic that the middle letter in the word pride is "I." When pride becomes paramount, it becomes all about me.

A missionary was ministering among people living in a remote region of the world who possessed no written language. For this missionary to introduce Scripture into this culture, he had to first help them translate their spoken language into written form. He found it hard to translate the word pride into their language. He came upon a word in their dialect for someone's ears being too far apart. In other words, pride is an inflated head.

We read in Proverbs, "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before the fall" (16:18). Eugene Peterson translates this proverb in *The Message*: "First pride, then the crash—the bigger the ego, the harder the fall."

Religious people are particularly susceptible to pride. There is a certain smugness that creeps into our hearts when we're trying to live a moral life. We begin to think of ourselves as morally superior. Self-righteousness breeds pride.

C. S. Lewis writes, "As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud person is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you can't see something above you."

Maybe you wondered about my unusual sermon title, *Everybody Acts Medium*. It's taken from a book by Charles Swindoll, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*. Swindoll writes about a group of children who built a clubhouse in their neighborhood. It was a place where they could meet in solemn assembly or just laugh and play games. They thought long and hard about the rules for their clubhouse. They came up with three rules: nobody acts small, nobody acts big, everybody acts medium. That's not bad theology.

Nobody acts small. Maybe you wrestle with a negative self-image and low self-esteem. In God's kingdom, nobody acts small.

People are reluctant to talk about depression in churches. We solicit prayer for people in physical difficulty, but we are loath to ask prayer for people in mental distress. You heard in today's Minute for Witness that depression can have a physical component. It also has a mental source. One of the leading factors in depression is low self-esteem. As we consider these seven deadly sins this summer, we can miss the main

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point. We are deeply loved by God.

“What do you assume God feels when you come to mind?” David Benner asks in his book *Surrender to Love*. He writes, “When I ask people this question, a surprising number say that the first thing they assume God feels for them is disappointment or anger. They assume it is their sin that first catches God’s attention.” Benner thinks such people are dead wrong on this point and the implications of such an erroneous view are enormous.

The first thing God feels for you is love. God created you and seeks to redeem every part of you. God loves you. We’re not going to make progress in this series of sermons if we don’t understand this core principle. The doctrines of creation and redemption are based on the Biblical promise, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Nobody acts big either. Social scientists have coined a term for this nobody-acts-big attitude: illusory superiority. This cognitive bias causes people to overestimate their positive abilities and underestimate their negative qualities. It’s sometimes called the Lake Wobegone Effect, named after Garrison Keillor’s fictitious town in *Prairie Home Companion*, “Where all the women are strong, the men are

good looking and children are above average.” The Lake Wobegone Effect causes us to inflate our positive qualities in comparison to other people.

A College Board Survey asked high school seniors to rate their own ability to get along with others. Less than one percent rated themselves as below average and 60 percent of them ranked themselves in the top ten percent. A whopping 25 percent rated their ability to get along well with others in the top one percent. This Lake Wobegone Effect is not limited to students. According to one study, 94 percent of all professors say they do above average work in the classroom. Eighty percent of drivers rate themselves in the top 30 percent of all drivers on the highway. The Lake Wobegone Effect is a leading cause for rising CEO pay in companies. No firm wants to admit to having a CEO who is below average.

The Lake Wobegone Effect reveals our pride. We regard ourselves as better than we really are. We assume the best in us and the worst in others.

Scripture tells us the brutal facts. We are deeply flawed. We are not paragons of virtue in this church. We are deeply flawed people. Yet, we are also God’s beloved people. Maybe the kids in the clubhouse are right. Everybody act medium. We are deeply flawed and deeply loved.