

In fall of 2017, I began a series of Pastor's Notes excerpting from a 1941 speech by Dorothy L. Sayers: "The Other Six Deadly Sins." After nearly two year interruption, I now conclude the series by presenting the seventh and final part of her speech, which deals with the deadly sin of Pride. If you would like to read the previous installments, you can find Parts 1 through 5 on the website in our Archived Bulletins from 9/24/17 through 12/10/17, followed by the sixth part, which I shared just last week (8/18/19).



The Other Six Deadly Sins

by Dorothy L. Sayers

Part VII – *Superbia* or Pride

But the head and origin of all sin is the basic sin of *Superbia* or Pride. In one way there is so much to say about Pride that one might speak of it for a week and not have done. Yet in another way, all there is to be said about it can be said in a single sentence. It is the sin of trying to be as God. It is the sin which proclaims that Man can produce out of his own wits, and his own impulses and his own imagination the standards by which he lives: that Man is fitted to be his own judge. It is Pride which turns man's virtues into deadly sins, by causing each self-sufficient virtue to issue in its own opposite, and as a grotesque and horrible travesty of itself. The name under which Pride walks the world at this moment is the Perfectibility of Man, or the doctrine of Progress; and its specialty is the making of blueprints for Utopia and establishing the Kingdom of Man on earth.

For the devilish strategy of Pride is that it attacks us, not on our weak points, but on our strong. It is preeminently the sin of the noble mind—that *corruptio optimi* which works more evil in the world than all the deliberate vices. Because we do not recognise pride when we see it, we stand aghast to see the havoc wrought by the triumphs of human idealism. We meant well, we thought we were succeeding—and look what has come of our efforts! There is a proverb which says that the way to hell is paved with good intentions. We usually take it as referring to intentions that have been weakly abandoned; but it has a deeper and much subtler meaning. That road is paved with good intentions strongly and obstinately pursued, until they become self-sufficing ends in themselves and deified.

Sin grows with doing good. . . [the] Servant of God has chance of greater sin and sorrow than the man who serves a king. For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause serve them, still doing right.

T.S. Eliot: Murder in the Cathedral

The Greeks feared above all things the state of mind they called hubris—the inflated spirits that come with over-much success. Overweening in men called forth, they thought, the envy of the gods. Their theology may seem to us a little unworthy, but with the phenomenon itself and its effects they were only too well acquainted. Christianity, with a more rational theology, traces hubris back to the root-sin of Pride, which places man instead of God at the centre of gravity and so throws the whole structure of things into the ruin called Judgment. Whenever we say, whether in the personal, political or social sphere,

I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul

we are committing the sin of Pride; and the higher the goal at which we aim, the more far-reaching will be the subsequent disaster. That is why we ought to distrust all those high ambitions and lofty ideals which make the well-being of humanity their ultimate end. Man cannot make himself happy by serving himself - not even when he calls self-service the service of the community; for "the community" in that context is only an extension of his own ego. Human happiness is a by-product, thrown off in man's service of God. And incidentally, let us be very careful how we preach that "Christianity is necessary for the building of a free and prosperous post-war world." The proposition is strictly true, but to put it that way may be misleading, for it sounds as though we proposed to make God an instrument in the service of man. But God is nobody's instrument. If we say that the denial of God was the cause of our present disasters, well and good; it is of the essence of Pride to suppose that we can do without God.

But it will not do to let the same sin creep back in a subtler and more virtuous-seeming form by suggesting that the service of God is necessary as a means to the service of man. That is a blasphemous hypocrisy, which would end by degrading God to the status of a heathen fetish, bound to the service of a tribe, and liable to be dumped head-downwards in the water-butt if He failed to produce good harvest-weather in return for services rendered.

"Cursed be he that trusteth in man," says Reinhold Niebuhr [Beyond Tragedy] "even if he be pious man or, perhaps, particularly if he be pious man." For the besetting temptation of the pious man is to become the proud man: "He spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous."

