

*Matthew 6:1-8 (NIV)*

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>3</sup>But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>6</sup>But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. <sup>7</sup>And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

*Matthew 23:1-12, 27-28 (NIV)*

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: <sup>2</sup>“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. <sup>3</sup>So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. <sup>4</sup>They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

<sup>5</sup>“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; <sup>6</sup>they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; <sup>7</sup>they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

<sup>8</sup>“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup>And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. <sup>10</sup>Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. <sup>11</sup>The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup>For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

<sup>27</sup>“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. <sup>28</sup>In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

*If there are three words that sum up our popular culture, they are these:*

*Image is everything.*

One week down, six to go. Here again are the seven capital vices:

- Envy
- Vainglory
- Sloth
- Anger
- Gluttony
- Lust
- Greed/avarice

As I wrote in last week’s study, these seven came to be referred to as capital vices. “Capital” because they are deadly to the soul. “Vices” because they are habits, not mere transgressions. Thus, referring to the seven as “deadly sins” isn’t really correct. Sins are individual transgressions, acts we undertake that do not reflect the love of God and others. But vices are habits, just as virtues are habits. Vices are patterns of behavior cultivated over long periods that harm us and those around us.

If you go online and search “seven deadly sins,”<sup>1</sup> nearly all the references will include “pride” in the list of seven. But our list has “vainglory” in its place. What gives?

The early Christians wisely understood that pride was really the root of all the vices. It is easily confused with vainglory, a word we rarely hear anymore (though you’ll see it is a really good one!). Rebecca DeYoung helps us to grasp the difference between the two:

“Vainglory and pride are also easily confused because they are both “spiritual” vices— vices that have a spiritual, rather than a bodily, good as the object of their disordered love. Their objects of love also indicate their close connection. Pride excessively concerns excellence itself (excelling others); vainglory, by contrast, concerns primarily the display or manifestation of excellence.

In short, what makes vainglory distinct from pride is love of “the show.” Prideful people want more than anything else to be “number one”— they seek greatness and superiority, even in ways that appropriately belong only to God. The vainglorious, on the other hand, do not aspire to something because it is excellent. Rather, they seek whatever will bring in the most public applause, whether deserving or not. Pride is a desire for genuine status; vainglory, a desire for recognition and acclaim.”<sup>2</sup>

Take the Pharisees that Jesus is talking about in both of today’s Scripture passages. Some of them don’t seem to care at all about the genuineness of their prayers or the authenticity of their humility. Instead, Jesus says, “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries<sup>3</sup> wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others” (Matthew 23:5-7).<sup>4</sup>

These vainglorious Pharisees have come to the belief that *image is everything*. It no longer matters to them the sort of Jew they really are, all that matters is how they are seen by others. They have long ago forgotten God’s words to Samuel as the prophet examined each of Jesse’s sons:

“The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

### *Image is everything*

No one could deny that we live in a culture obsessed with the desire for recognition and acclaim. We usually call it fame and it seems like everyone wants it and will do practically anything to get it, even if it only lasts Andy Warhol’s fifteen minutes.<sup>5</sup> I remember an MTV show in which teenage boys would send in videos of themselves doing stupid and disastrous skateboard and bike tricks. The more horrific the injury, the more likely the video would air. The show’s name? *Scarred*. Yes, really. Such an approach to fifteen minutes of fame is extreme, but, hey, they got on national TV and on YouTube – globally.

Have you ever wanted to sing like Pavarotti or Beyonce, dance like Astaire or Abdul, play the piano like Van Cliburn or the guitar like Eric Clapton? What if an angel told you that God would give you that ability – but you would possess the ability only when you were completely alone. Would you be interested? A vainglorious person would walk away. What good would there be in having such a gift if no one knew? No fame? No applause? No point.

All of these glittering vices are perversions of something good and even God-given. We all desire to be known and to be loved. Vainglory is the *excessive* and *inordinate* desire to be seen, to be honored, to be glorified, even when there is nothing for which we ought to be seen, honored, and glorified. Vainglory is like a movie set. Looks great from the outside, but open the door and walk in . . . nothing. We honor valedictorians. We honor devoted

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, very few people differentiate between sins/transgressions and vices/habits. We should.

<sup>2</sup> DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk (2009-06-01). *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (p. 62). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition

<sup>3</sup> A phylactery is a small leather box containing Hebrew texts on vellum, worn by Jewish men at morning prayer as a reminder to keep the law. See Deuteronomy 6:8.

<sup>4</sup> See the page 4 textbox for one interpreters take on this passage from Matthew.

<sup>5</sup> Warhol, the icon of pop art, famously said, “In the future everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” With the advent of the global internet, it seems to me the day Warhol prophesied has come to pass.

kindergarten teachers. That is all right and good. But vainglory entices us to seek the applause without the achievement.

How many Facebook users offer the world a peek into their real life, as opposed to a synthetic version that protects their image? Doesn't it seem like all of your Facebook friends are having a lot more fun than you are? (They're not). Without vainglory, much of our fashion and cosmetics industries would collapse.

Sadly, Cassian and other early Christian teachers saw that vainglory is especially a problem for Christians who are growing spiritually. Why? Because it is easy to find ourselves wanting others to see and to appreciate just how far we've come, seeking applause for our piety. Sounds like a bad joke, but, in truth, it is a much-needed caution. These vices wouldn't be deadly if they weren't always sitting there waiting to grab us, to devour us (Genesis 4:6-7). We ignore these vices at our own peril, for the battle must be fought or it will be lost.

Of course, talking about vainglory and all the rest of the glittering vices in this way can be pretty daunting, even depressing. Rebecca DeYoung was asked about this in a 2009 interview:

*What would you tell someone who shies away from looking at the influence of sin because he or she finds it depressing?*

This isn't another "try these three quick tips and you'll master this problem" program. That kind of false optimism is characteristic of our therapeutic culture. As you make progress in the spiritual life, you see just how deeply the things that you're struggling with are rooted. Sanctification does imply that progress is not only possible but also expected, and that becoming more and more like Christ is a journey and a destination.

On the other hand, the point is certainly not to get caught up in a sense of guilt and an oppressive sense of one's own shortcomings. Both perspectives come from thinking about this as "my job, my project," rather than thinking about this as "what God has given me the grace to try to do." If it's all up to me to face all of this sin in my life, oh, it is depressing. Grace is not a trivial thing; it's an incredibly significant and powerful means of assistance. So both the overly optimistic and the overly pessimistic approaches come from focusing too much on what we're able to accomplish and not enough on what the grace of God is able to accomplish in us.<sup>6</sup>

*The antidote?*

When Christians before us sought to understand and overcome these vices, to cultivate good habits rather than bad habits, they saw that each of these glittering vices has an opposing virtue. Aquinas wrote that the virtue opposed to vainglory is *magnanimity*, another word we rarely encounter anymore. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines "magnanimous" (from the Latin for great + spirit) as: "a loftiness of spirit, enabling one to bear trouble calmly, to disdain meanness or pettiness, and to display a noble generosity."

DeYoung again:

Magnanimous people radiate God's beauty and goodness in the world, drawing others to that glory, a glory that transcends the person and his or her act. When others witness these acts, their attention is elevated above the one acting and is ushered, momentarily, into the cathedral of God's presence in human action. Acts of magnanimity, whether public or private, large or small, inspire not empty glory but genuine awe. A magnanimous action may be something great in the world's eyes or something not easily recognized by the paparazzi (Mary's quiet fiat at the annunciation is a prime example; see Luke 1: 26– 38). The point is that it is something that stretches human power to its limits. It is a "city on a hill" sort of moment that gives us a glimpse of graced obedience and shalom shining in the darkness. The vainglorious, by comparison, are working for the artificial illumination of the limelight and the canned applause from a sitcom audience. They achieve only the shallow

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<sup>6</sup> From an interview with DeYoung on the *Christianity Today* website (September 25, 2009).

vener of magnanimity's true substance. Vainglory gives one a quick and fleeting high instead of the substantial and lasting reward of virtue.<sup>7</sup>

We were created to know, to love, and to glorify God. Christ calls us be the light to the world, a light that enables everyone to see for themselves the grace, the mercy, the justice, and the love of God. Vainglory, on the other hand, beckons us to glorify ourselves.

It is worth remembering that the great composer Johannes Sebastian Bach, a person worthy of acclaim and recognition if there ever was one, ended every manuscript with the words: *Soli Deo Gloria*, to God alone be the glory! Amen and Amen.

### Whose approval should we seek?

In his commentary on Matthew, Eugene Boring reflects on the desire of the Pharisees to be approved of and praised by their fellow Jews.

The modern reader may hear a text about “making phylacteries broad and fringes long” as evidence of the irrelevance of the Bible, since such petty sins seem far removed from the sinful realities we are called to confront. Or it may seem directed to persons long ago and far away, or at least only to ostentatious examples of religiosity in our own time. From either perspective, such a text seems to have little to do with us. A closer reading may reveal that something near the center of our own life and being is here addressed, something that seems so right and human. We all like to be acknowledged at social gatherings; we all like to be greeted in the marketplace. It is not a matter of being hypocritical, but of being human: We are social creatures, and we like to be known and liked; it strikes at our sense of self-worth to be ignored or subtly put down socially. All of us live under internally imposed constraints of peer pressure and the desire to be accepted by others, to be insiders, to belong. Today's readers might well be wary of reading this text as a way of smugly criticizing the presumed ostentation of first-century Jews—easy to caricature from a distance and with our ignorance of Judaism—and instead attempt to address the text to our own desire to fit in and be recognized and appreciated (promotions, advancements!). Should this even be attempted? It strikes at the modern cultural idol of self-esteem. Can this be done, or are we all sentenced to playing out our lives as responses to these pressures for place and recognition? Matthew proposes an alternative world, a world seen from the perspective of the kingdom of God, an alternative family where the approval of God removes the heavy yoke of self-justification. There is more here than cheap shots at religious phonies in their long robes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Boring, M. E. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Matthew. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 8, pp. 432–433). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Spend some time talking about the meaning of “vainglory.” It is a word we rarely come across anymore. How would you explain to someone the difference between vainglory and pride? Jesus accuses the Pharisees of both vainglory and hypocrisy. What is the difference between them?
2. Why do we so easily fall into seeking glory for ourselves rather than striving to let God's glory shine through us? In what ways do we allow church to become a show?
3. How can we begin to be more concerned about seeking God's approval rather than trying to impress our neighbors so we can bask in their applause?
4. Finally, we all desire to be known and to be loved, that is how God made us. So, how does this good desire become perverted and twisted into the deadly vice of vainglory?

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<sup>7</sup> DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk (2009-06-01). *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (p. 65). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Psalm 8</b> It is God who is to be glorified.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Psalm 29</b> David sings of the glory of God.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 2 Corinthians 4:13-15</b> Glorify God for his grace demonstrated in Christ.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12</b> “We pray this so that name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you.”</p>
<p><b>Friday, 1 Peter 4:7-11</b> “. . . so that in all things God may be praised”</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

