

The Great Sin
Ezekiel 16:48-50; Luke 18:9-14
11/1/15
Randy Lovelace

By way of confession and admittance, I want to let you know that there's now a clock at the back of the room. It is there because I requested it. So I'll make a deal with you. We're going to be spending a month in the Book of Ezekiel, and then in December move to Jeremiah. Now, we're going to do something that's unique for me, perhaps unique for you. We're actually going to spend the month unpacking three verses. So, there's a lot I had prepared for today. So if I don't finish, I'm just going to stop wherever I am, and we'll pick up next week. Is that fair?

So, you might be saying, "Why in the world would he spend this time in three verses?" Partly, it's because it's one of the unique passages in the prophets. It uncovers something for us. Perhaps if you've been around as a Christian for any time, you might have heard of the two cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And you also might have answered the following question: why did God judge Sodom and Gomorrah the way that he did? Most Christians that I've met over the years have said, "Well, it was because of their rampant sexual immorality." But, indeed, this set of verses in Ezekiel demonstrates something very different. And he takes us much deeper into the reality of our need of a Redeemer—one who would rescue us.

And so each week as we look at these three verses, you will also be greeted with a fulfillment, a corollary, a way to connect it to the New Testament. In other words, every theme brought up in these verses is a Biblical theme from beginning to end. So my goal is that you might have a great picture of what God is doing throughout the totality of his Scriptures, but also see something which is lurking underneath our skin, our flesh—deeply rooted patterns that the gospel must move in and transform.

So, we begin today with what I completely ripped off from C.S. Lewis, and that is "The Great Sin," from his book *Mere Christianity*. See if you can pick it out. Ezekiel 16:48-50, and then a complementary passage from Luke 18.

"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done.

"Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen." [Ezekiel 16:48-50]

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” [Luke 18:9-14]

The great sin is pride. May the Lord give us the light of his Word and the power of his Spirit, that we may be able to see the ways in which pride has worked its way into our hearts. Let’s pray.

Lord, we ask that you would take your Word governed by your Spirit and your authority, guided by your loving hand. May you bring the light of the gospel to the areas of our lives we’ve allowed pride to set up camp. But Lord, do not leave us there. As the one who rescues us from sin, may you show us clearly its antidote—that antidote of the grace of the gospel in Jesus Christ—that you might make us, as a result, a people not characterized by pride, but a people characterized by loving humility, because the grace of God has moved in. Help the teacher. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

You’ll see there in your outline, I simply want to cover these three things. First, pride is the virus that Ezekiel is pointing out as he talks about Sodom. But he does so by talking about how pride is the virus of the people of Judah in Jerusalem. Then the symptoms of pride, building off of this virus. What are its symptoms? That we might be able to see how and in what ways it is operating. But also, its antidote. So let’s look together.

Pride is the virus. Brief word of background to the Book of Ezekiel. Perhaps you’re not familiar with Ezekiel. Ezekiel, whose name literally means “God will strengthen,” was taken into Babylonian captivity in 597. He was in captivity for five years before he first began to write his prophesy. He was carried off into Babylonian exile with ten thousand other Jews from Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar was wise. He was a smart despot. He first brought the artisan and the educated, the elite, from Jerusalem first, and then would go shortly thereafter in the second wave of bringing into exile another group. Ezekiel was part of that first group. He is in complement with Jeremiah, some would say Obadiah, some would say Habakkuk, and Daniel. He was giving his first oracles at age thirty, and his ministry of prophesy would last some twenty-two years.

Why is this background important? Perhaps it’s because I want you to be able to connect the dots. Israel was no longer the center of importance. God had allowed them to go into exile, to teach them, to discipline them, to actually see that exile could be a very powerful pace to seek redemption, grace, forgiveness, to be used by the Lord in ways they could not imagine—that out of them, as we would read on in the Book of Ezekiel, and we will get there—a shoot will come out, a Redeemer.

You see, as I’ve stated before, I believe that since roughly the early 1980’s, the church in the United States—that is, the Christian church—has been in exile. Some thought we were there in exile far earlier than others. No longer is the church considered something even worthy of importance. We’re certainly not in the top-ten list of those who are sought out for wisdom in our day. What could the Christian church learn while in a country that no longer sees it as valuable—simply sees it as a pass-time, a crutch? And isn’t it easy, while in exile, isn’t it easy for the church of Jesus Christ, as it was for the nation of Israel when it went into exile, to point fingers at the Nebuchadnezzars, at the great Satan, Babylon? Isn’t it easy to point the fingers and say, “The problem isn’t us. The problem is out there.”

And in many ways, throughout the history of Christianity, one of the great ways to sort of beat up on one of the great characters of the Bible is to say, “Oh, Sodom and Gomorrah.” And generally, people have seen the locus of God’s judgment to have been on their lack of sexual ethics. But what we learn in this passage, what we learn in this segment, is that, indeed, the key virus for Sodom and Gomorrah—and I want to at least give you this proposition this morning—that the key virus to all human sin, stretching from Genesis to Revelation, is not found in behavior. Let me say this clearly. I’m not suggesting that sexual sin is not serious. It is. But I want to put forth to you this morning that sexual sin is an external reality that finds its roots in something far deeper, and that is pride.

The first sin, the Bible teaches us in Adam and Eve, was a desire to be like God—not to remain where God had created them, not to stay in the relationship that God had created for him and his first, beautiful, human being. But rather, they wanted more. And they believed the lie that God doesn't want you to be like him. And see, this is an important point for Lewis, when he writes that, indeed, the sin of pride is itself unique among the pantheon of sins. He says this. He says:

I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to Pride in others. There is no fault that makes a man 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. According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Sexual immorality, 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.

Pride is, as one writer said, "the tap-root of the tree of sin." And isn't it easy? It's very easy in the Christian faith to point finger at all the visible trees. The harder part is allowing the gospel to go below the surface to remove the root system. Anyone who's done any gardening at all recognizes that if you're going to remove a tree, if you're going to remove a plant, you're not going to be very successful if you simply remove what is visible and leave the root system. For a birthday gift to my wife a couple of years ago, I removed a corner part of our lot. It had some bushes that I really disliked. And so I removed as much as I possibly could visibly. I even got a tiller to try to remove as many of the roots as I possibly could. But I will tell you, still to this day, every spring, every spring, one little shoot comes up all around. And no matter how hard I try, those roots still remain somewhere, lurking. The reality is, that is pride. How pride shows itself, however, is going to be different depending on the person.

But the key virus in the human heart is: I want to be God, I want to be like God, I don't want God running my life, and I think I'm doing quite okay all by myself. So when Ezekiel calls out, he says to the nation of Judah, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done." And so he goes on and he says, "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride." Meaning, they some themselves as better nations. And now Ezekiel is saying to Judah, "You have done even worse. You have received the blessing and the election of God. You who were nothing in the nation of Egypt were brought out of Egypt and redeemed, to because of your worthiness, but because of God's grace and promise. And yet you would point the finger at Babylon? You would point the finger at your sister Sodom?" He's trying to uncover the roots of pride in the nation of Judah.

Why? Because here's the hard part about a prophet. The prophet Ezekiel, along with his contemporaries, are called to live a life of suffering—to bear witness to God's truth before his people, recognizing that when he states it, he will receive suffering. People will argue against him. People will seek his life, because he dares to tell the truth. But why does Ezekiel tell the truth? Ezekiel dares to tell the truth not because he's trying to be mean or he's wanting to just wage war against the people of God to make them feel guilty. No, not at all. His desire in telling the truth is: truth will set you free. If you don't know the virus, you can't receive the cure. And if you don't recognize the symptoms, you don't even know you have the virus.

So let's look together at some of the symptoms. None of these are original to me. They are a conglomeration of all that I've gleaned and learned and read over the years, all put into one point. No, not everything, but at least the prescient points. So here we go.

Number one. One of the earliest things that Lewis taught me is a symptom of pride is, it is chiefly competitiveness. Meaning this: if everybody had the same amount of money, if everybody lived exactly the same kind of life, had the same kind of affluence, had the same kind of access and everything else, he says, pride would not exist. Because pride is not just trying to gain more for the sake of gaining more. No,

it's to become one who has more than somebody else. Pride gets no pleasure out of having, he says, something only out of having more of it than the next guy. Nearly all those evils in the world which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of pride. Do you feel the pang of competitiveness come out when you compare yourself? Or do you struggle with comparing yourself against others?

Jealousy. Jealousy is the resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another, an advantage that you are convinced ought to rightly be yours. Why should somebody else's success or promotion or praise provoke jealousy in our hearts? Why not joy at somebody else's success? The answer is that we don't want others to appear better than us. We are convinced that we are more worthy and more deserving of the same advantage.

Anger. Now, what could anger have to do with pride? Anger is a sour feeling in our souls that someone else has so offended us, so stepped on our character, so stepped on who we are, that we are provoked to revenge. We are provoked to allowing bitterness to well up within us and say, "How dare you?" It isn't to say that there's not righteous anger. There is. But anger is a very dangerous verb, not an emotion. It's a verb. It's a very dangerous thing to play with. Because the reality is, most of the time, when I understand my own anger, it is not born out of righteousness. Rather, it is born out of the reality that I don't want to look bad in the eyes of other people, and it makes me angry that somebody else has, perhaps, called attention to my weaknesses, or made me feel my weakness. Just being honest.

What about deceit? Deceit is so, well, deceptive. Why? Because pride leads us to see that one of the reasons why we lie, one of the reasons why we feel the necessary pressure to embellish stories, to mislead, to speak in fuzzy terms, is because we want others to think that we deserve their attention, and we want to hide that, in fact, in reality, we are afraid of being exposed. We want to matter. We want to be on the inside circle. And then even the inside circle has an inside circle. And so we will play fast and loose with the truth, that we might gain entrance.

What about pretense? Now, pretense has a number of different shoots that it appears as. It can appear as spiritual pretense. It can appear as ethical pretense, or even professional pretense. What do I mean? We are motivated to pretend to be something we are not, because we fear being seen and known for what we really are. We are afraid of being seen and known for what we really are. Years ago, the Philadelphian Choir sought to ask a number of CEOs at Fortune 500 companies to ask them: what is your number one fear? And across the board, the number one fear was being found out that they are not as successful or adequate or competent as people think they are. Of being found out. Interesting. And so we lead a pretense. We don't want people to see that, in reality, whether it be spiritual or ethical or professional, we simply find it difficult to find our pants down by our ankles.

Slander is another symptom. Why do we speak and find it so juicy to speak negatively of others? It's because oftentimes we're doing so because our pride has been hurt. Therefore, it's very easy to diminish others in the minds of other people in the hopes that we might find favor and respect. It's very easy. The whole slander of gossip seeks to tear down another so that we can find an end. Hang with me. It's going somewhere.

Greed is another symptom. Greed at its core, as we've heard, is the desire to make more of and for ourselves than God wishes or permits. And pride is the poker, this writer says. Pride is the poker that stokes the fire of materialism. We can't stand the thought of people thinking we aren't as rich and successful and talented and deserving and sophisticated as others.

But then finally—and this is perhaps the rub—the real symptom of pride is a hardness and resistance to the reality that in all of us, pride has its roots. And so the proud heart becomes impervious to rebuke and insensitive to conviction. These are just but some of the symptoms.

Perhaps you've heard in Catholic theology the idea of the seven deadly sins. There've been movies made about it. The reality is, across Christian traditions, pride has always been at the head of the line, because its symptoms are so varied. And as Lewis said, pride does not prey on our animal nature. Unlike a lot of visible temptations, it doesn't prey on, necessarily, first and foremost, on our sense of physical desire. Rather, he says, it comes directly from Satan and hell itself, and finds its way and wedge into our deepest crevices and motivations and loves. This is the nature of pride.

What then? If the symptoms are varied, if the key virus is pride, then what, then, could the antidote be? And by the way, the reason I put in here Luke 18 is, you can begin to see a number of these symptoms, can we not, operating in the Pharisee? You see the competitiveness in his comparing himself against the tax collector. You can hear the pretense. You can hear the performance. You can hear the greed. You see the pride.

So what, then, is the antidote? The antidote, as we read here in Luke 18:13, when he says, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" Now, lest we miss it, the antidote to pride often is thought of to be pride's opposite. The way to cure pride is humility. But humility, while it is the opposite of pride, is not pride's antidote. Because, I believe, humility cannot be—and I believe the Scripture teaches this—that humility cannot be aimed at directly. Otherwise, humility can become a source of pride. If my goal is to be humble, at what point have I arrived? When I compare myself against other people? When I compare myself against my past performance?

No. The antidote is not humility. Humility is a byproduct of pride's antidote, and that is grace—the grace of the gospel. Because at the heart of the gospel of the cross, the gospel of grace, is something so profoundly offensive, something that goes to the very core of our pride and shines a light on it, that we say, "Surely, it cannot be!" The way out of pride, the way to see its symptoms in my life, is to recognize that I am deeply in need of the grace of forgiveness, the grace that tells me the uttermost truth about my pride, but then comes in to give me not a path out of pride, but, no, gives me the person of humility: Jesus Christ.

You see, the reason Ezekiel spent so much time in this in talking about the pride of the nation of Judah was to lead them to see, indeed, that the source of their resurrection, the source of their redemption, was never in themselves or in their moral rectitude or in their being better than other nations, but in finding forgiveness in God who was their redeemer. And it would begin by entering into that grace through repentance, through acknowledging the symptoms of pride, and receiving the grace of forgiveness.

But to understand the antidote to pride, we have to understand the different audiences that hear this call to this antidote. First, I want to point that the person who is a moral conservative, the gospel of grace is deeply offensive. Because, you see, what we learn from Ezekiel and what we learn from the parable is this: that if you truly, really are working hard to be a moral person, if you have sought to be obedient, if you have sought to be a moral person in goodness—for example, if you are a person who finds pride in the fact that you have been faithful to your spouse—if that is your source of pride, your moral rectitude, the gospel of grace tells us the person who finds their moral rectitude in their faithfulness in their marriage is no different than the person who's given into temptation over and over and over again. Because it is never, ever our performance that enables us to receive grace and to find the forgiveness for pride. Because the gospel lays a very flat line for everyone. All of us suffer from the virus of pride, and our moral rectitude cannot save us. It isn't what God was after in Sodom. It was after a heart that simply said, "I am self-reliant. I can pull my own self along by my own bootstraps. I can do it, and I'll call you in to help me with the thirty percent that I can't." It is deeply offensive to the moral conservative.

It is deeply offensive to the liberal mind who says this whole idea of a God who dies on the cross is both primitive and, frankly, judgmental. The fact that the gospel of grace would come and say that all of us are infected with this virus of pride is deeply offensive to the liberal mind. Because why? Isn't pride something to be respected? How are you to say that to me? And how is the answer a man dying outside of Jerusalem two thousand years ago? Because the gospel comes in and says we are all sinners and have fallen short of the glory of God, and we're all deeply needing of that one Savior.

There is also something that is deeply offensive in the antidote to pride, the grace of the gospel, not just to the liberal mind, not just to the moral conservative, but also to the despairing person. I was reminded of this from Søren Kierkegaard who wrote that "the twisted knot of pride leaves a person who is despairing in life in their despair, because they refuse to receive the truth that the grace of the gospel reaches anywhere and anyone in any place at any time." And the despairing person who refuses to see that the grace of the gospel actually brings forgiveness, actually brings healing, and actually demonstrates the love of God, no matter where you are, no matter what you've done, no matter what circumstance you find yourself in—is a person who's left in despair because they bring with them a truckload of pride. I am too despairing. God is not powerful enough to reach me. It isn't that it's wrong to be despairing. The question is, if you are so despairing of your life that you believe that the grace is not good enough, strong enough, powerful enough, piercing enough, to show you and demonstrate to you the love of Christ, then, in truth, you are saying, "God is not enough." And you will stay in that place of despair. Do not allow that knot, the knot of pride, to say that Christ and his grace is not enough.

But finally, the final audience is to the converted Christian. Remember Ezekiel's words were being given to the people of God. His desire was to restore them. They were already God's people. And, yes, even to the converted Christian, even the gospel of grace as the antidote to pride can be deeply offensive. Richard Lovelace, to whom I am not related but continue to quote for years and years, said this:

It is therefore not surprising that many congregations which are full of regenerate people are nevertheless not very alive spiritually, since spiritual life demands metanoia, a new mind of repentance, and this requires more than an initial setting of the heart against the shallow expressions of sin which the believer is aware of at the time of conversion... Most congregations of professing Christians today are saturated with a kind of dead goodness... surface righteousness which does not spring from faith and the Spirit's renewing action, but from religious pride and conditioned conformity to tradition.

It is very easy as a converted Christian to stay happy with dealing with the surface sins that we first became aware of early on in our conversion. And once those are removed, it's very easy to live there. And I will tell you as a pastor, it is very easy to go across congregations, across country, and recognize at that level, you will be accepted and not pushed beyond, so long as we can show conformity to the tradition and have a form of self and surface righteousness. But the gospel is so deeply offensive, because even to us who proclaim Christ as our Redeemer and Creator are those who are deepest in need and perhaps the first in line to hear that the grace of the gospel exposes even our pride.

And how has our pride left us in the shallow end of the pool of sanctification? That we have just enough Jesus, just enough forgiveness, just enough grace, just enough success, just enough friends, just the right church to stay okay from now until we're about seventy-five or eighty. But the grace of the gospel comes in. Just as Ezekiel said to the people of Judah, just as Jesus taught those who were the religious leaders of his day, he says, "What is required to receive the antidote to pride?" It is admitting that we are prideful. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. May you, by your

goodness and love, by the grace of the gospel—if you from all eternity set before us a Savior who became man to die on a cross and be raised on the third day because you loved us, how much more, then, do you not want the blood of Christ to go to every corner of this prideful heart? Not because he's after us. Not because he's angry with us, but because he loves us and wants to make us a people who are a shining example, trophies of grace.

And when we allow the grace to lead us to confession, to lead us to asking for mercy and asking the light of the gospel to demonstrate the symptoms of pride in our lives, then, slowly but surely, humility takes hold. And when someone comes to you to confront you because of sins or patterns of hurt that you've done, you're ready to receive and not resist. It's not that it's easy, but you're ready to receive it. You're ready. Instead of tearing the other person down who has hurt you, you're ready to see that the symptoms of their hurt to you also rise up in your own heart as you seek to respond. The Lord wants to make us more and more into the image of his dear Son who was and is God who humbled himself, that we might know his grace—a grace that is an antidote to the great sin of pride. May the Lord enable us to drink deeply of this grace.

And I will ask you to join me in this journey. I have preached I don't know how many sermons over the years, but I have never preached a sermon that saw pride as the primary subject. In the wrenching of my own heart this week as God, by his grace, has demonstrated prideful patterns in my own life, I say this to you not as one who has arrived but one who is battling and, when I'm honest, wincing at the threads of pride in my own heart. I ask you to join me in this, because there is no freedom in pride. There is only bondage—bondage to self. But there is a great freedom through the love of Christ, our humble Savior. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would heal us. By your Spirit and Word, uncover the symptoms in our lives, because pride is an abomination to the gospel. But we confess to you, Lord, that the gospel is also offensive to us. But in it, we see the love of Christ. Have mercy, O Lord. Have mercy on us, sinners, and give us grace, that we this morning may be able to sing with one voice, "And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Savior's blood?" Thank you. In Jesus' name. Amen.