

“Beauty”

Proverbs 31:30, 27:19; 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Mark 12:38-40; 2 Corinthians 4:16

“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)



One of the sadnesses in our culture is the ever-growing sense among too many that life is all about the Show, i.e., what you want everyone to see, like the Teachers of the Law in the above passage from Mark. Last week, we talked about “wealth,” which can be used to pay for a lot of Show. Don’t you know those Teachers of the Law had very impressive robes and tunics...

This week, we turn to “beauty,” which can easily be twisted into the Show. In 2021, Americans spent more than \$15 billion on cosmetic surgeries and procedures. If you spent \$1 every second (\$86,400 a day), it would take you nearly 500 years to spend \$15 billion. That \$15 billion bought a lot of anxiety, for we can’t actually turn back the clock. The Show, the book cover by which we tend to judge people and people often wish to be judged, expresses a fundamental vice that plagues the human heart.

There are seven capital vices in the moral theology of the Church. “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. The seven capital vices are:

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

If you go online and search “seven deadly sins,”¹ 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 useful 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.” Proudful 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

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

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.”²

In the passage from Mark, these vainglorious Teachers of the Law 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).

Or the words from Proverbs:

“As water reflects the face, so one’s life reflects the heart.” (27:19)

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.³ 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 Paula 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 these capital 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 kindergarten teachers. That is all right and good. But vainglory entices us to seek the applause without the achievement.

And, of course, we all play our part in this. We say so often, “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” and proceed to do exactly that.

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 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 daunting, even depressing. Rebecca DeYoung was asked about this in an interview:

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

² 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

³ 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. We call it, “TikTok Famous!”

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 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.⁴

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 capital vices has an opposing virtue. Aquinas wrote that 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 beauty⁵ 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 veneer of magnanimity's true substance. Vainglory gives one a quick and fleeting high instead of the substantial and lasting reward of virtue.⁶

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.

⁴ From an interview with DeYoung on the *Christianity Today* website (September 25, 2009).

⁵ Perhaps at some time in the future, we can talk beauty as one of the signposts to the truth of God and God's goodness.

⁶ 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.