

“Real Life”

John 10:10; Psalm 37:4–5; Ephesians 3:14–21

What keeps us from the life God offers?

Often, it is pride.

Have you ever gotten in your own way, i.e., ended up undermining your own efforts? I’m pretty sure most of us have stories to tell on that score. Perhaps it was gluttony or lust, avarice, or anger that threw us off track. We want to lose weight or control our temper or stay faithful or be content with what we have, but then anything from a buffet table to a shiny black F150 rears up in front of us and we think to ourselves, “I’ve earned it,” or “I deserve it” and we are back where we started. But it often goes deeper than that.



Directly to the point, we say we want a deeper relationship with God or to grow as a disciple of Jesus, but we often actually work against this. It all goes back to where this series started. Our hearts are our autopilots, for we are all driven by our desires, our loves. We do what we love. Yet our hearts are disordered. We love the wrong things or we love the right things the wrong way, often without realizing it. It all seems right and good, until we discover that our choices have led us into yet another mess.

The long line of Christians who have come before us tell us that, at the root, our problem is pride, which is problematic for us. Is there really something wrong with being proud of our accomplishments or our children? Bishop Will Willimon considers this in his book on the vices:¹

Perhaps the Fathers of the Church called Pride the chief sin, the very first sin, in an admirably honest attempt to address that particular sin of “good” people first, the sin one most likely would find hanging out at the church, the sin most likely to breed among faithful, good people—such as people who might read a book on the Seven Deadly Sins. I’m proud that the Fathers put Pride first. Downright humble of them. C. S. Lewis called Pride “the great sin” and devoted an entire chapter of *Mere Christianity* to Pride alone.

We are what we worship. Aquinas noted that Pride is a turning-away from God. It is worship wrongly ordered. It is the sin of Faust, the sin that is the refusal to stay in one’s proper place, the sin of the upwardly mobile. It is thinking of oneself as the Creator rather than the creature. In fact, without a belief in God, I can’t figure out why Pride ought to be condemned. Perhaps that is why Pride has become a virtue, with the pushing of God out of the world. Pride is essentially a liturgical matter, a matter of wrong worship. Whereas most of the other sins really need no theological justification, when it comes to Pride, without the theology, I can’t figure out much justification for considering it a sin. Pride may make people annoying, difficult to live with, in need of some good-natured deflation, but it is not a “sin”— *unless Jesus says so*.

Christians are trained to agree with the Jewish mystic philosopher Martin Buber when he says, “The struggle with evil must begin within one’s own soul.” My sin is the problem, not yours; my Pride, not yours. If you are not attempting to be a Christian, I can’t imagine why you would be troubled by your sense of Pride. If there is no God, then Pride can be a healthy, creative response to the emptiness of the world.

But for those of us who are following the way of Christ, stumbling along after him, to be sure, but still following, then our Pride—our subtle, deceitful, intraecclesial Pride—is the first sin that we must consider and confess. Our Pride is part of our self-deceit, our lying about our real situation. As frail, mortal, vulnerable creatures, we react to our vulnerability in futile ways, one of them being our Pride.

¹ Willimon, William H. *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins* (pp. 33-35). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

There is something incredibly pitiful about modern, twenty-first-century North American people telling ourselves that our greatest need is for more self-esteem, more self-confidence, more self-assurance—pitifully revealing how little esteem, confidence, or assurance that we have in ourselves. Of course, from a Christian point of view, that's the problem—ourselves.

What can we do?

But what can we do in the face of our self-deceit, of our insistence on our self-sufficiency? As in most things, the place to begin is with Jesus, who after telling his disciples to set aside their worries, pointed them in God's direction:

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus points us toward this great truth: the kingdom of God is to be the first priority in our lives and, if so, all else will follow. Our energies and passions and devotions are to be poured into the kingdom. We are to see the world as God sees it. Then, our desires, our loves, will become more and more in line with God's.

In the Greek, “strive” is an imperative, a must do – we are to keep striving. This is not about a hoped-for someday coming of God's kingdom but about its reality today, for our own lives. D.A. Hagner puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew: “This imperative means that one should make the kingdom the center of one's existence and thus experience the rule of God fully in one's heart.” Even this is a bit abstract for me. How do we experience God's rule in our hearts?

The kingdom of God is exactly what the words say: it is the place where God is king, where God rules. Even though we live in a world that is plagued by tragedy, violence, illness, materialism, and selfishness we can choose to live according to God's teachings, pursue the virtues and turn away from the vices. In other words, we are to keep striving to live according to God's moral will, for that is true righteousness and an essential part of our heart's transformation.

The stuff of life

Jesus says if we strive first for God's kingdom, then “all these things will be given to you as well.” What sorts of things? What we eat. What we drink. What we wear. (v. 31). Though I doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth, I also suspect he wasn't speaking of dinner at a four-star restaurant, MoëtChandon, and designer clothes.

We have a way of making “wants” into seeming “needs.” To an extent, this is a good thing. Increasing standards of living have resulted in numerous benefits for millions of people. But, still, we seem to chase an unreachable goal. No matter how far along we get, we just redefine the target further away. Somebody always has a bigger house or a more luxurious car. George Will wrote, a need “is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want,” leading to “a blurring of needs and wants.” The result is what he calls the “tyranny of the unnecessary.”

If we are going to find our way to Real Life, to the abundant life that Jesus promises and desires for us, we have to begin by recognizing that our own desires are misplaced. Too often, we seek the things of this world, whether it be stuff or status, rather than the things of God. Our journey begins with the transformation of our minds and hearts, our desires and dreams. By the grace and power of God, such transformation can be ours. Indeed, you might take a moment and read the passage above from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. God is the one “who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” Amen.