

Slaying Sloth and Pride; Training for Zeal and Humility
Philippians 2:2-11
Lent V Midweek
March 25, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This evening, we conclude our midweek meditation on slaying the old Adam and training up the new – that life of sanctification, the baptismal life of bearing fruit of repentance, the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit that flows from faith in God *into* fervent love toward one another.

We've saved for last the ultimate source of all our problems... and that particularly pernicious sin is the *mostly* quiet (*sometimes* loud) **pride** that loves Self, wants to serve only Self, and therefore despises the First and Second commandments that point *away* from Self – the First Commandment highlighting the proper fear, love, and trust of the true God; and the Second Commandment highlighting the willingness and confidence to identify one's self with and call upon and depend upon the true God.

Simply put, Old Adam fears, loves, and trusts in Self above all things. He will *harm* neighbor, *take* from neighbor, *covet* what belongs to neighbor – he will do anything and everything for Self, thereby showcasing he does not love neighbor as Self, and he will justify all of that in his heart because he trusts his own judgment regarding himself; and he stands proudly and defiantly in his

nakedness, having convinced himself there either is *no* God to be feared or that his *own* righteousness has pleased the true Almighty God who is to be feared... that the true God is impressed by Old Adam's righteousness, impressed because Old Adam's righteousness outshines any righteousness God would have *expected* from man, and thus (Old Adam convinces himself) his righteousness exceeds not just that of the pharisees but of God Himself, who is so *impressed* by Old Adam, *blown away* by Old Adam... thus, proving that Old Adam really outshines God, is really god-above-God.

Yes, pride of Self is really our fundamental problem, isn't it? Even when we claim we are embarrassed by Self ("low self-esteem") and have no pride in Self, it's really because we see ourselves as not living up to the potential I believe I *truly* have to shine like the sun in great glory before all others. "Oh why have I appeared so lowly before others, who now must *think* I'm nothing!... when I really deep-down desire to be, believe I *should* be, something!"

Yes, pride is a cancer that runs all throughout each of us, and it manifests itself *so much* in daily life that the other commandments must be placed as a fence and wall around my neighbor to protect my neighbor from my pride! And, while we may wrestle diligently against all those works of the flesh and Old Adam characteristics that transgress those *other* commandments (the four weeks prior in this series!), Luther recognized that pride is often the **last** and **greatest**

enemy within... pride is often the last bit of Old Adam to be overcome. And that's so for a few reasons:

First, Old Adam is crafty in veiling his pride behind what appear to be good. Old Adam is not opposed to doing those things which are outwardly good, just so long as they either bring him honor and are noticed by others, or they bring him self-satisfaction. Old Adam is very willing to exhibit (think of the last four weeks) **kindness** if he is confident someone will be kind in return, to be **generous** because he's then "owed" something – either by the neighbor or by 'karma', to be **chaste** as long as he is adequately loved by another, to be **patient** and **gentle** and **forgiving**, as long as the one who crossed him once doesn't do it again. Yes, Old Adam dresses up his love of Self behind goodness, conditionally carried out... not with confidence in God, but with approval of Self's "obvious" love of and bearing with the less-righteous neighbor... a supposed Selflessness which God must surely approve because of how much I've suffered... must think highly of, and reward.

Indeed, so insidious and nearly universally true is this of each of our Old Adams that we instinctively prepare ourselves for a supposedly *due reward* when we hear this term: "good work." Yes, God should be pleased with me; my neighbor should be thankful to me. I should be noticed; I should be rewarded. I am "owed" *something* for my good work!... when really "good work" only means "work borne out by the fruit of the Spirit as it rejoices in the

goodness of God.” But, that ‘meritorious’ hearing of the term “good work”... that instinctively meritorious definition we assign it is just the subtle pride of Adam, around which entire religions and church bodies are designed and their temples built!

The **second** reason pride is the last to be overcome is because we often aren’t *aware* of it and very seldom can anyone help us notice it, precisely because it’s buried so deeply in the heart that it only can be diagnosed in how we *privately* are interpreting daily life matters. Other sins are ‘out there’... they happen *to* others, in ways noticed by others, and those others can call us to repent. And, we might try to make excuses about such ‘outward’ sins or deny guilt, but at least we have to acknowledge someone else has noticed them. Not so with pride; it is well-rooted ‘in here’ (heart) and most often remains ‘in here.’ (On the outside, a gentle smile; ‘in here,’ pride.) When it *manifests* itself through those other sins, the *other* sins are perhaps addressed, but rarely will we use the opportunity to dig deeper and see the true problem; we’d rather be forgiven and quickly forget about it and move on... And *pride* remains.

The **third** reason pride is last to be overcome is because it plays well in a world that lives by the theology of glory. The business that wins the bid is not the one that is always best suited to help the neighbor, but the one who best ‘sells himself’ to the neighbor. The sports figure that is most loved is not the one who selflessly does the

dirty work, but is the most flashy, the center of attention. Teenage peer pressure is all about being noticed and remaining in the supposed sphere of popularity and influence. All of daily life in our society is about promotion of the Self. This is especially true in the new realm of social media, where all are encouraged to boast of themselves (after all, who wants to look at a social media page filled with *humility* – boring); and, in that social media realm, often the only way you even get noticed *is* to boast of yourself!

Interestingly, the antidote for such pride is not self-deprecation; the Scriptures never say that. They never say, “Belittle yourself; make fun of yourself; speak poorly of yourself, that others may speak well of you!” No, that self-victimization could actually just be a backdoor form of Self-pride, a way to *keep attention on* Self by others feeling sorry for you! It’s *certainly* is still a focus on Self.

Instead, the Scriptures speak positively of boasting, but only of boasting *in Christ Jesus*: “Far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ, by which I am crucified to the world and the world to me,” Paul says. And again, he says, “Let the one who boasts boast *in the Lord*.” This is actually a fruit of the Spirit, and it is to be practiced, exercised as a full-frontal assault on Old Adam pride. Indeed, this is true *humility*.

Humility... we think of that word, again, as self-deprecation, even self-loathing. That’s not true humility. Rather, true humility recognizes you are not the center of attention – whether through

self-glorifying or self-loathing... you are not the center of attention precisely because you are not God. You are the creature, not the Creator. You are the redeemed, not the Redeemer. You are the imperfect one in *the process of* being made holy, not the perfect one who is *already holy in himself*. True humility rejoices in being dependent upon the Father as Creator and Provider, dependent on Christ and His salvation, dependent on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, that we might be *blessed* to live out the fruit of the Spirit.

This is what is at the heart of St Paul's words to the Philippians: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves." Better, not meaning a moral or value judgment, but meaning they are those to focus on because you don't have to focus on yourself; you live confidently that Christ in His mercy is focused on you! Is this not the humility of Christ, who humbled himself and became obedient as a Servant *for you*. You were his focus; *you* were the center of his attention. *You* were the reason for his incarnation (which, today – March 25th – is the day of the Anunciation, the angel visiting Mary to tell her that the Christ was becoming true man, and that which would be found in her womb would be of the Holy Spirit as part of that plan – that "humiliation" of the Christ.) The humility of Christ is not that he was self-deprecating; no, at times he spoke very clearly and boldly about who He was and is as God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God. He spoke very unapologetically of His mission, and of all

mankind's salvation found *only* and *exclusively* in his mission – only in Him: “No one comes unto the Father, but by Me.”

Is that sinful pride? No. His *true* humility was that his focus, his goal, his purpose was *your* wellbeing. His humiliation was not that he was “embarrassed” to become Man, his humiliation means ‘the process of his humility’ ... he became man *for your sake*, he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died *for your sake*. His mission was not for himself, but for the neighbor – a whole world and eternity of neighbors – including you.

So, Paul says, “Have this mind of yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” In Christ Jesus, we are *safe* to not think of ourselves. We are safe to crush the pride of Old Adam, to confess that we are the *created* and the *redeemed*, and safe to abandon idolization of Self for the sake of reflecting Christ upon our neighbor. Such humility need not mean self-loathing, self-deprecation. Such humility may actually look like bold confidence. How often are people offended by the Christian who is unapologetic to confess Christ? How often do people find themselves offended by the confidence of their pastor – think of Luther and how his opponents thought he was arrogant. No! – just joyous confidence in the Gospel! So, whether Luther or any pastor, it's assumed to be arrogance, when really it is the bold humility of one who can serve his neighbor with confidence that Christ is his righteousness. He doesn't have to *care* what people think of him; his work in His Office can joyfully boast of Christ, and he

need not be ashamed of himself, self-loathing, speaking poorly about himself, worrying about others' opinions... he may joyfully and confidently focus on his sheep – true humility – in bold confidence of Christ for him and with him.

That bold humility can be every Christian's as well... *ought* be yours as well! You need not loathe yourself, always think poorly of yourself. You may simply 'not think of yourself'... and instead think of your neighbor. You are free to love and rejoice over your neighbor because you have confidence that the one true God of heaven has created, redeemed and still sanctifies *even you and your neighbor*, both of you being among the lowly of earth!

And that bold humility in Christ – the fruit of the Spirit regarding the First Commandment – pours forth in zeal, the fruit of the Spirit regarding the Second Commandment and bearing the name of Christ rightly. Yes, true zeal – the fruit of the Spirit that proactively attacks the *sloth* of Old Adam as he doesn't want to waste energy confessing and worshiping Christ... the sloth of Old Adam who despises the Second and Third Commandments. (Don't think we had overlooked discussing the *Third* Commandment. It is really bound up in, and flows from, the first two Commandments.) Thus, for New Adam to combat Old Adam's sloth regarding the first three commandments – the First Table of the Commandments – God has granted New Adam the fruit of the Spirit that is zeal.

Zeal is not a bad term. It's not listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit, but you may rightly consider it a combination of the fruit of the Spirit known as love and joy – Zeal! Sadly, how truly that word has been made to sound bad, and people have been trained to hear that word as sinful... A “zealot” is not one of good reputation, seen as a religious fanatic.

But the difference between a zealot and proper zeal is not the boldness and confidence of the heart, but the *object* of one's zeal. Sadly, many religious people *are* zealots because their focus is on a false gospel and, with it, a false god and false love and false joy. But true zeal rejoices with bold humility in Christ Jesus and, thus, totally depends upon Christ and actively calls upon Christ to do *His* holy will, to have mercy where He will have mercy, to have vengeance where He will have vengeance, to deliver us where and when He will deliver us.

New Adam is confident in that, and so joyfully prays for it and rests in it. But Old Adam is not confident in it, indeed, proudly rejects it because it detracts from his love of and joy in and worship of *Self*. So, Old Adam drags his feet, is too busy or too proud to pray, takes no comfort in resting at the altar and pulpit of Christ. He despises preaching and God's Word, belittles the Holy Sacraments as inventions of Man, refuses to call upon God's Name... or, if he does use God's name, he does so to curse his neighbor, pridefully swear empty vows he knows he can accomplish for his own glory; he'll

appeal to satanic arts and false gods just to trash New Adam's joy in wearing the name of Christ... indeed, he'll even appeal to New Adam's Christian status to advance false doctrine, lies, and deceit... more believable if advanced 'in Christ's name', Old Adam schemes.

Your Old Adam is very busy and active in falsehoods to defend his sloth and laziness in the true things of God. Your New Adam must recognize this and very intentionally run himself to the Word and Sacrament, drive himself to prayer, compel himself to the lifelong learning of Scripture. New Adam must never rest from such things and assure himself that he has perfectly drowned Old Adam's prideful sloth, **for this – Old Adam pride – is the very core of the matter, the very lifeblood of Old Adam, the very heart of the battle of the soul**; and the very moment New Adam thinks he has handily subdued Old Adam's hatred of Christ and His promises, at that very moment Old Adam will give one last tremendous push and free himself into a renewed rejuvenation of his pride of Self and the sloth of his own Self-worship.

So, New Adam must constantly exercise himself in running to where he knows Christ has promised to tend to him: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

And that's the **joy**, friends, in this lifelong battle of the soul. **You are not alone in this battle.** It *is* lifelong, to be sure. But Christ never tires or grows weary of forgiving you, serving you, supporting you, sustaining you. He gives you His Word, He gives you His

Sacrament... not as the feast of champions for those Christians who've earned it, but as the food of heaven for those who *need* it, who *need* to be forgiven and sustained by it, who need the rest and the strength that *Christ* here freely gives.

In short, Christ knows the battle *of* the soul is imperfect and ongoing, that Old Adam has much in the world and with the help of Satan to energize his worship of Self. And so, Christ gives New Adam something stronger, something more eternal, something divine... Christ gives you Himself: "He who hears you, hears Me" He promises those boldly confident pastors of humble service. "This is my body, my blood... for you" He promises those boldly confident Christians who humbly approach His table.

Therefore, New Adam, you have every reason to continue to enjoy the ongoing battle *of* the soul, for you live in the certainty that Christ has already won the battle *for* your soul. And, thus, you may joyfully learn, practice, and exercise the fruit of the Spirit, trusting Jesus and following him on the Way... that Way of Life into which He has redeemed and baptized you, that Way of Life that leads through the cross and the grave to the new creation and the life of the world to come.

In the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit.
 + AMEN +

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