

¹²I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

¹⁷Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

I have to admit, I don't much relate. Do you? Have you ever felt like Paul, the author of these words, felt like you are "the worst" of all sinners? Sure, we may occasionally commit acts of blasphemy idolatry or persecution, but I doubt any of us have ever considered ourselves an idolator or a persecutor. I understand that Paul was ashamed of his previous life, that he was full of regret and remorse for what he had done, and because he was, he had a great appreciation for the mercy and forgiveness offered to him through Christ, but I admit, I can't much relate to what he's saying here.

Indeed, if I, or most people of my generation or younger for that matter, have an issue in life, it's that we aren't enough like Paul. We are not, like Paul, prone to feeling unworthy, indeed it's just the opposite—we tend to think that we're too worthy. And the problem of having an inflated sense of self-worth doesn't seem to be getting better with future generations, if anything, it's getting worse. According to blogger Professor Grace Moon, "The Millennial Generation (Also called Gen Y) has been dubbed the 'Entitlement Generation.' The term pretty much sums up their attitude. Not only were they coddled by their parents, which has created a palpable disrespect for authority, but they've grown up during the most affluent time ever in history. Instant gratification? That wasn't even a concept growing up in the '70s." This expectation of instant gratification and the sense of entitlement isn't really a surprise because along with a generation of condoning and coddling parents, we have created a society of instant gratification and expectations of entitlement. I've mentioned before my dismay at an "Awards Ceremony" I attended when Nathan was in preschool. I went expecting a few honors to be awarded to a few children and teachers who had done something outstanding. Instead I sat through nearly an hour of child after child—indeed every child in the auditorium—parading across the stage to receive an "Award". At the first—and last—such ceremony I attended, my son Nathan—who was nearly four years old at the time—received an award for learning to use the potty. Really—you're going to give a kid who is nearly four years old and otherwise within the normal scale of development—you're going to reward him for using the toilet?!?! I'm all about recognizing achievement, but rewarding a child who is quite past the age of potty training for finally using the potty—that's ridiculous. Is it any wonder the kid sometimes asks for a "reward" for doing normal household chores and, the other day, said that he had "ordered" a certain Star Wars toy from Santa for Christmas!

In our Tuesday morning adult education classes, Jim Bendig often references Reinhold Niebuhr who elaborates on Augustine's discussion of sin which he summarizes as pride or pride's alter-ego—concupiscence. Concupiscence "refers to inordinate desire, an insatiable lust. . . . [a] disorderly desire [that] results from our disconnection from God as the center of our lives. [Concupiscence] It is a wide reservoir out of which particular obsessions and compulsive attachments emerge. It prompts a preoccupation with this world's goods."ⁱ As Jim summarizes it, concupiscence is acting out of our animal instincts without regard for self, other, or God. Concupiscence is the pursuit of our most basic and lustful desires. Jim illustrates the meaning of concupiscence with a rather vivid example of something he once saw a monkey doing at zoo. Unfortunately, we have all heard about acts of concupiscence—the greeter at Walmart being trampled last year at the day after Thanksgiving sale because people acting out of concupiscence valued the mighty dollar over a man's life. In what turned into a stampede when the doors of the store were opened, people acted like animals, fighting

and running and pushing and shoving—with the sole goal of “getting” something—without caring about the people around them. As a result, a man was shoved to the ground, trampled and died. In his life as Saul—a persecutor and killer of Christians—Paul suffered from concupiscence—hunting Christians like a lion hunts gazelle. And when Paul realized what he had done, he repented and enjoyed the mercy of God. I imagine he felt like that single, lost 100th sheep, the one from this morning’s gospel, the one who wanders astray, the one the shepherd goes after and searches for until it is found, that 100th sheep, the one who, as we see on the bulletin cover, the one who gets carried what the other 99, the 99 who watch as the master carries in the lost sheep. Some of these are basically good sheep, just waiting around for the shepherd to return home. But then there are a few others, the ones who may wonder why the sheep who went astray gets carried back while they’ve been there in the pasture all along, the ones who haughtily stand in the pasture believing they are there because they deserve to be there—indeed, they believe they are there as a kind of reward, there because they are entitled to be there. And here we have another kind of sin—the sin of thinking and expecting that we belong, the sin of thinking that we deserve it because we’ve earned it. The sin of thinking that we are, well, God—entitled, awarded, and deserving all the glory. This is the sin of pride. In my experience, it seems that we’re more likely to err on the side of the sin of pride, more likely to be one of those few sheep standing haughtily and proudly among the 99 sheep in the pasture rather than the 100th sheep who went astray and is now, like Paul, so relieved to be sought out, forgiven, and carried home.

I was talking to my husband Corey the other day about this problem of the haughty and proud sheep. In his world religion classes he explains to students that each major world religion address a specific problem that is faced by humanity and that each religion offers a way of life that is the solution to that problem. While Judaism’s story is one of exile and return, and Christianity’s story is of sin and salvation, for Islam, the problem facing humanity is self-sufficiency—or pride. It’s the pride of thinking that you don’t need God, when God is, in fact, *all* that you need. Against this hubris, Islam offers a path and way of life that helps people to *remember* God. The rituals of Islam – fasting, daily prayer, almsgiving, pilgrimage – are all intended to draw Muslims closer to God. When you stop to pray five times a day, you recognize that there is something greater than the details and schedules of daily life. When you fast during the day for the month of Ramadan, each time your stomach growls, you recognize that the basic sustenance for your life comes not from you but rather from the bounty of God’s creation. When you give two and a half percent of your income to the poor—in addition to what you give to the mosque—you recognize that just as others depend on you, you depend on God, and when you make that pilgrimage to Mecca, you recognize that our earthly homes are but temporary and that there is a time and a place even greater than ours.

Concupiscence or pride—both are sinful. With concupiscence, we crowd out God and replace God with the base desires and drives to pursue our most basic and animalistic instincts. With pride, we crowd out God in our efforts to condemn and judge others and replace God with ourselves. But regardless of the nature of the sin—regardless of whether we are the 100th sheep who has wandered off to the seemingly greener pastures of this world—or we are one of 99 sheep who has stayed in the pasture and commended ourselves with pride for doing so—or we are one of 98 sheep—sometimes prideful, other times concupiscent—God is with us. God is our shepherd, chasing after us, challenging us, holding us accountable, asking only that we repent and try again. Asking only that we, like Paul, accept God’s grace and mercy—no matter what our wrongdoing may be—accept that grace and mercy and move on. Because God has a lot in store for us—and it’s all waiting for us—right there, right here—within the fences of the kingdom. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ www.ptypes.com/pride-and-sensuality.html