

Vainglory

The word “vainglory” is not a word that gets much use in modern English. Even the word itself seems confusing.

- After all, isn't it right to want better things, something more and greater than what one currently has?
 - If a person doesn't want better things, won't they just turn out to be an unmotivated slacker, whose life is nothing more than a long series of missed opportunities?
- And, in any case, what is wrong with some ambition, wanting to get out into the broader world and find some success? And if we work for more and do better at what we do, surely there is also nothing wrong with being appreciated for what we contribute.

Thomas Aquinas, writing in the fourteenth century, starts his discussion of vainglory with questions just like these.

- Taking these questions seriously, he begins by asking, “Is vainglory a sin? It seems that vainglory is not, for the following reasons...”
 - He notes that in Mt. 5:16, Jesus commands his disciples, “Let your light shine before people that they may see your good works” and in Rom. 12:17, Paul tells believers, “Do good works both in the sight of God and in the sight of all people.”
 - Scripture, Aquinas notes, also says that those who have a good intention when they act publicly will also be honored by God and given glory; e.g., Prov. 3:35 says, “The wise will possess glory.”

So at first glance, it looks like there is no problem here, since good works done in public can receive an equally public honor and there is nothing obviously wrong with wanting this. And this is what we usually assume to be the case.

In the next section, Aquinas then takes an exactly opposite position and argues that what we normally think is not right. In fact vainglory is a deadly sin that kills both one's love of God and one's love of one's neighbor and leads us into a sickness and a kind of slavery where everything depends not on God, but on other people's opinion of us. Aquinas notes that in Gal. 1:10, Paul speaks very sharply against this approach to life, saying, “If I were still to please human beings, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

My guess is that most of us here are as conflicted as Aquinas was. We want better things. We want to get ahead. We would like other people to appreciate the work we have done and the things we have achieved. But in the back of our mind, there is some part of us that recognizes that living for a certain kind of public success is a very narrow life and worrying about what other people think of us is very stressful because it makes our emotional life feel like a roller coaster, where we are thrilled when

people recognize us, but feel hurt (even crushed) when we are not appreciated or are passed over or are criticized by people whose opinion matters to us (and whose approval we want).

To unpack our conflicted feelings about success, honor and recognition and arrive at a healthier place, we need to understand what the Holy Scriptures actually teach about vainglory.

The Greek word used in the New Testament is κενοδοξία (*kenodoxia*).

- *Kenos* means “empty, vain, futile.”
 - In other words, the thing in question is imagined to be something that it is not.
 - In reality, it will not be what people hope it will be and it will not achieve what people hope it will achieve.
- *Doxa* means “opinion.”
 - It can be used to speak of the good or bad opinion other people may have of a person.
 - It is therefore tied up with the ideas of reputation, esteem and being favored by other people.
 - It has something temporary about it, because people’s opinions change constantly, in a way that one’s established judgment (γνώμη, *gnome*) does not.
 - Opinion also lacks the certainty that scientific knowledge based on close study (ἐπιστήμη, *episteme*) has.

Like pride (*hyperephania*), which we looked at last week, vainglory (*kenodoxia*) is tied up with the ideas of being arrogant and boasting (ἀλαζονεία), out of vanity, that one is more than one actually is or has more than one actually has.

The difference between pride (*hyperephania*) and vainglory (*kenodoxia*) is that

- (1) Pride requires me to contrast other people negatively with myself (I put myself up by putting others down), but I don’t need or care about their view of the matter. (After all, I’m right and they’re wrong!)
- (2) Vainglory requires me to look good in front of other people and I need their approval (I need them to see and affirm how wonderful I am), but I don’t need to contrast myself with other people to achieve this.

What vainglory and healthy ambition (wanting better things) have in common is this:

- Both involve trying to be good (or spiritual) and wanting to have more power.
- In both cases, the goal of one's action is to make one's struggles and achievements known publicly, so as to receive praise or favor.

What makes vainglory different from healthy ambition is that vainglory includes one of the following:

- 1) At some level, one believes that one is what other people say (i.e. that one's identity depends upon other people's opinion or favor);
 - a. Often one can only discern this attitude indirectly, by the subtle ways it impacts a person's willingness to act.
 - i. For example, when one believes that one is (more or less) what other people say, one will be gripped by a fear of a failure (and rejection) that prevents one from even beginning to engage an issue or take on a task.
 1. Deferral, avoidance, and procrastination, combined with anxiety and skittishness when one finally has to deal with a situation (i.e. can no longer avoid it), are often signs that a person is held fast by some unseen form of vainglory.
 2. When a person is becoming emotionally exhausted by the need to perform and keep up a good image, this is often a sign of an underlying commitment to vainglory.
 - a. The desire (or rather, hunger) for recognition and admiration is bottomless and can never be wholly satisfied. Inevitably this will drain and exhaust the powers of one's inner life.
 3. To a healthy person, the vainglorious person's fear, anxiety and avoidance will seem like overreactions.
 - a. The healthy person can see what the person gripped by vainglory cannot: In general, other people are far less interested in us, our actions and our issues than we ourselves are. Furthermore, other people will likely spend much of their time wondering what we think of them and actually spend less time on what they think about us.

- 2) We devote a great deal of energy to finding new and clever ways of letting other people know what we have done, but the image we give of ourselves is not wholly true.
- a. What we say about ourselves overstates what we have actually experienced or are capable of.
 - b. What we say about ourselves conveys a false image that minimizes, ignores, forgets or passes over our own faults.
 - i. Cf. Nadine Brown, *Bathe Seven Times: A Contemplative Look at the Seven Capital Sins*, 72 [bottom of page]
 - c. We resent other people asking questions that challenge our picture of ourselves.
 - i. Furthermore, when other people challenge our picture of ourselves (e.g. as being good or spiritual),
 1. we respond to them in ways that are
 - a. much more forceful than we anticipated and
 - b. are out of proportion to what they previously said or did;
 2. we find it unusually difficult to give up our negative attitudes toward them (hostility, ill will, suspicion of their character and motives, desire for timely retribution), in a way that cannot be fully understood by looking at their previous action itself.

Example: Abraham of Santa Clara (1644-1709) was well known as a preacher and a spiritual guide. One day a wealthy lady who was very active in religious events at the church came to see him. She wept as she told Abraham that she was sure that she was the greatest of all sinners and that no one else could compare with her in the number and seriousness of the sins which she had committed.

Now Abraham knew that this woman was very religious and often came to the church to pray. He could also see that this woman was accusing herself and humbling herself. Still, he sensed that something was wrong. Abraham therefore advised the woman not to continue speaking this way, because the person who is truly humble does not display her humility. "It is much to be regretted," he said, "that you publish the fact that you are such a great sinner."

At this point, the woman's attitude changed and she became angry and spoke to him very sharply, "Who can say a word against me? I have done nothing wrong. I spend the greater part of my time in church. I fast frequently and perform other good works."

Abraham could now see that the woman was motivated by vainglory. Having previously given up truth, she was now also willing to give up love to prop up her false image of herself. Abraham simply smiled, bowed and left. (adapted from Tonne, *Lent and the Capital Sins*, 3)

- 3) When we are subtly gripped by vainglory, we have trouble receiving things from other people and even from God—the question we need to ask ourselves, then, is “Where are we closed off and why?”
 - a. The vainglorious person is like a jar that is already filled to the brim with pictures of his or her own self-importance. Just as a jar that is already filled up with oil cannot receive the water one wants to pour in, in the same way a vainglorious person has great trouble receiving the wisdom and love of God.
 - i. “...if a man thinks he knows it all, then there is nothing left for him to know, not even what God might tell him. If the soul is filled to the brim with [itself], there is no place left for God.” (Sheen, *Victory Over Vice*, 48)
 - b. A person gripped by vainglory wants to be seen as doing things for other people and such a person will make a point of been seen to be in a position of service. The person’s attempts to display humility will nonetheless seem forced and to attract more attention than is necessary. This is because the person really imagines himself or herself to be higher than others and sees a lower position as contrary to his or her normal state.
 - i. Cf. Nadine Brown, *Bathe Seven Times: A Contemplative Look at the Seven Capital Sins*, 72 [top of page]
 - c. One can see this inability to receive (or even ask) something from others in the parable Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk. 18:9-14).
 - i. The Pharisee asks nothing from God but instead calls attention to his own good deeds. Because he is unwilling to ask, he cannot receive. Instead the Lord says to him, “By praising yourself before other people, you have already had the only reward you wanted.”
 - ii. The tax collector, by contrast, admits his failure and asks only one thing: “God, have mercy on me a sinner” (Lk. 18:13). He receives what he asked for and goes home forgiven.
- 4) The person who is gripped by vainglory often cannot discern what God is doing and misunderstands even what he or she does see of God’s actions.
 - a. Jesus’ greatness came to him not (as the vainglorious person thinks) from the opinion of the crowds or from the public miracles that the crowds adored.

- b. Jesus' greatness lay instead in his hidden service to humanity, in the suffering he bore, which no one wanted (certainly not the vainglorious!) and which caused even his closet friends to abandon him.

The vainglorious person's greatest loss is that he or she cannot understand or appreciate the poverty and utter humiliation which Jesus accepted to win our redemption. (Cf. 2 Cor. 8:0: "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty, you might become rich.")

To see what God is doing, we must first look away from our own things and our own certainties about how things are going to turn out. It was only after a night of fishing and catching little or nothing that Peter could look away from his own things and see and appreciate the supernatural harvest of fish that Jesus made possible.