

The Seven Deadly Sins

Greed - Getting Carried Away or Being Carried Out

Acts 5:1-11

A man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ²and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." ⁵When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

“The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed – for lack of a better word – is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms – greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge – has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed – you mark my words – will not only save [our company,] Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA.”

You may recognize these words from the film *Wall Street* spoken by the ruthless power baron, Gordon Gecko, making a shameless pitch for greed as a virtue. Greed is good, he assures us.

Or, as Donald Trump once said in *The Art of the Deal*, ‘You can’t be too greedy.’ (Trump: *The Art of the Deal*, p 48)

We’ve been looking at the 7 Deadly Sins this fall. And as we come to the last two sins, greed and envy, I want to take a moment to distinguish them since they may seem synonymous.

Greed focuses on possessions – our stuff. It describes a defective relationship we have with what we possess. Greed reveals a lack of contentment with what we have.

Envy adds the element of relationship. Stuff... the things we possess (material or immaterial) may be the occasion for this sin, but envy begins with the act of comparing ourselves to someone else... and measuring the difference, the inequity. It then balloons into the sinful act of trying to gain advantage over another person. It’s about conquest and glory so that I’m able to say I’m better than you.

Greed is about controlling our stuff

Envy is about controlling our relationships, and that’s where we’ll conclude the series next week.

As we begin to think about greed, as we’ve been doing let’s first be clear about what greed is.

Then we’ll consider 2 questions:

II. What are the consequences of greed?

Augustine said that the fruit of sin is... sin. Sin has a way of breeding and creating a chain reaction in our hearts and in our world. There’s fallout.

III. How can we hold our possessions in such a way that we are truly content... content with what we have, and content with what we are in this life?

I. WHAT IS GREED?

Dorothy Sayers once again proves to be a good place to start to give us not only a definition, but a sense of the texture and contours of this vice. She writes:

Greed is an “unromantic... unspectacular sin” (93)

It’s a “creeping, pinched kind of sin” (93)

Elizabeth Oldfield quotes Basil the Great who asks and answers: Who are the greedy? Those who are not satisfied with what suffices for their own needs. Who are the robbers? Those who take for themselves what rightfully belongs to everyone. And you, are you not greedy? Are you not a robber? . . . The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you [have saved] is for the needy. You are thus guilty of injustice toward as many as you might have aided, and did not.

Oldfield continues: our greed enslaves us while promising freedom. And a Basil notes: our greed feeds endemic injustice – it enslaves others. (*Fully Alive*, 1118)

Dante depicted the greedy as being chained to the ground, with their backs turned to heaven and their eyes fixed on the earth. They lament, “Greed quenched our love of good, thus all our labors were in vain.”

One writer says that greed is “a misdirected love.”^(Jeffrey Cook) Like sloth, greed turns our desires and longing from what really does have value and replaces them with cheap lifeless trinkets that cannot love us in return

Greed is the voracious appetite that Aquinas calls “the desire for profit which knows no limit.”

Rebecca de Young: Avarice (Greed) is not just about having more; it’s about what is mine.

Will Willimon: When a gift of God becomes “mine,” that’s when the trouble begins, and the evil begins to blossom

What makes giving so painful? Is it not the feeling that the money is our own. The one who is greedy takes pleasure not only in having more, but also in being the possessor of riches... the one who gives or withholds simply because she can.

2 classic examples from literature:

Gollum – you can envision his pinched, hunched self-protective form, purring over the treasure that he clutches, my precious

Charles Dickens, described Scrooge: “Oh! But he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.

And once we begin delighting in possessing what is our own, our treasures then have a way of deceiving us that we are self-sufficient – we need no one else. We are alone, and we are god!

II. What are the consequences of greed? What will greed breed?

James Ogilvy paints this picture of how greed plays out in our lives... Augustine’s sin breeding sin: “Greed turns love into lust, leisure into sloth, hunger into gluttony, honor

into pride, righteous indignation into anger, and admiration into envy.” Indeed one can make a case that greed is the sin behind all others – certainly there is a greedy grasping for more in that looking, liking, and taking of our first parents.

A. Greed generates fear.

But I’d like to suggest first of all that greed produces fear. Can one ever know if one has enough, if the pile I’ve amassed really will last till morning... if the stash I’ve hoarded will sustain me long enough?

Greed focuses on the future, and the future is a place of fear – fear that I will not have enough for tomorrow, fear that somehow the God who gives me each breath will stop providing.

To these fears, Jesus responds -- No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. ²⁵Therefore, do not be anxious (do not be afraid) about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And which of you by being anxious (by being fearful) can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not be anxious (do not be afraid), saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³²For people who do not worship God seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. ³⁴Therefore do not be anxious (do not be afraid) about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. (Mt 6:24-34)

Have you ever been asked to give away or even loan something that belongs to you.

It can be anything... a piece of clothing... food... a tool...

Or it can be your time... or your space...

And that twinge of reluctance grips you... that hesitant pause... or, that reflex to tighten your grip. It’s not always the stirrings of greed... there are always times when we have to exercise discernment, and sometimes there are good reasons to say no. Our stash is under assault. Our treasures are being plundered. Our fear that giving something away will result in hardship or disappointment or inconvenience.

Greed generates fear.

B. Greed justifies domination... heavy-handed, selfish control.

Now, to see this we have to back to the beginning once again.

In the beginning God created humans to exercise dominion over the earth, over every other living thing. His image-bearers, male and female, were to rule as co-regents of creation.

Critics of Christianity point to this language as supposed proof that Christianity is all about power, about controlling things.

If that were true, we should agree with the critics and condemn our religion.

But even though Christians and the Church have been guilty of greed and selfishness and domination especially when they have lusted for political power, humans were not told to dominate and selfishly suck the life out of the creation. First of all, this command is given before sin entered the world, and there's no reason to think that the world is out of control and needs to be reined in. But Second, the idea of God's command is a creative shepherding action of delegation. We were created to care for the world as God does. And the charge to rule and exercise dominion has the idea of bringing the creation to completion – to creatively make things of the world that enhance and enrich the world, and that steward the world to greater glory. Think of a conductor, leading the musicians to make better and greater music. Think of an artist coaxing out of the clay the beauty and order of bowls and sculpture. God charged his image-bearers to rule in his place... as stewards entrusted with great privilege. Remember when your mom or dad handed you the keys to the car to let you drive it on your own for the first time – yeah, it's like that only on a bigger scale. God throws Adam and Eve the keys: Here, take the world for a spin."

But if greed is about our belief that our stuff belongs to us, then believing we own the world means that we get to play god. We get to determine what we do with our stuff... and nobody gets to tell me what to... and nobody gets to say what's right or wrong with what I do with my stuff... because it's mine.

Now, Christians are materialists. We really are. Shamelessly so. And that's a good thing. It's part of being image bearers. It's part of the fact that God has made us for the world – yes, ultimately for himself, in the most important sense. But we're made from the earth, and to dust we will return. And God has created us and commissioned us as humans to work... to invest our lives in every part of his creation for his glory... and for our good. Matter matters to all thoughtful Christians. It is the arena in which we live, work, play, love, and die. And how we do all those things matter to God and matter to us. Matter matters.

But, when we are confronted with the sin of greed, with our lust for possessing stuff, controlling stuff, and using it for our own selfish ends... when we're confronted with our greed, we're tempted to react and say, "oh, I have to reject this world." The opposite of greed, or the cure for greed is not asceticism... and withdrawal from the stuff of life. The cure for greed is not to say with disgust, oh, creation is bad... ugly... evil... awful.

However, in the grip of greed, when we begin to use things for our own end... when we begin to look at our jobs, and our houses, our education, and our technologies... our stuff... as objects that serve our purposes, then here's what has happened

We have commodified life.

Whatever we have or want is no longer a thing in its own right – it's currency, mammon, money.

First, the commodification of life begins when we think that we have earned what we possess. Sweat equity. We've worked hard for what we own, and we deserve it. It's the just payoff for our labor, or so we believe.

And that leads to a **second** evidence of commodification. We believe that our possessions exist only as cogs in our economic machinery. They have little value for what they are... but their value is how they are useful to us. Our job is a lever to get a promotion... which is a tool to get a vacation home. Our education is a stepping stone to get recognition or an appointment. Our home is a means by which we strut our accomplishments or insulate ourselves from the world so we can have our stuff all to ourselves. We even then begin to think of ourselves as commodities, too – we see ourselves as part of the machinery... and we grant ourselves a kind of freedom to treat our bodies and our lives as things we can manipulate or treat as we think best. Now, it sounds quite pompous to say "I'm king of myself... of the kingdom of Steve." But we use terms like, "I just want to be true to myself.... I want to be who I see myself to be." And we grant ourselves the right to treat ourselves like a commodity to transform ourselves or make ourselves into the image we have adopted for ourselves. So, for instance, we hear some of our neighbors say, "Get your laws off my body."

Craig Gay has written a fascinating book called *Cash Values: Money and the Erosion of Meaning in Today's Society*. He writes as a Christian, and he observes that our idea and definition of wealth has shifted predominantly from the things we own to wealth itself... to money. This is what he says: "The subversion of physical reality [that is, the material world] reaches its logical climax when wealth is money." Money, he observes, has "filled the void that religion left behind" in that it becomes the defining evaluator of life and identity. Or, to restate in the way I've just noted, greed devalues material things for their own goodness... and that includes people... and when things become objects that I control, the physical reality of the world is undermined, its character is distorted, and I begin to believe that it exists only for my own ends.

It all comes from greed – believing that I own things that I really don't own, and then setting about to dominate... to make the world or even myself in my own image.

Greed generates fear
Greed justifies dominion, and

C. Greed produces unbelief.

One more consequence of greed. Greed produces independence and self-sufficiency, and in the end that kind of confidence undermines our faith in God. After all, if I have the means to provide for myself, why do I need to trust God to provide what I need?

III. How can we hold our possessions in such a way that we are truly content... content with what we have, and content with what we are in this life?

Now, lest you're concerned that I've forgotten about our text today, I haven't.

There's no mistaking that Ananias and Sapphira are guilty of greed.

We get a brief glimpse of what life in the Church was like in those early days after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The Church was still at the time very Jerusalem-centric. There had not been much time to see the effects of Pentecost, and the Church had not yet set in motion a plan for church planting throughout the Roman Empire. But we know that offerings were being collected for the needs of widows and the poor. We learn in Gal 2, more than 10 years later, when Paul and Barnabus were first sent out by the Jerusalem church leadership, they were charged to "remember the poor," which Paul said was "the very thing he was eager to do all along." All of the disciples were starting to travel more widely as the movement of Christianity began to radiate from its epicenter. We know that the work of the church had become complex enough to justify a division of labor – the apostles concentrating on teaching and preaching, and deacons concentrating on service and organizational life. All of these activities needed to be funded. So, we meet 2 donors, a husband and wife team, Ananias and Sapphira. They've obviously told the apostles prior to the events of Acts 5 that they owned a piece of land, and they promised to sell the land and give all the proceeds of the sale as an offering... a very generous gift.

But they put their heads together – they decided that they would not give all the proceeds as promised. They would hold some back, and they were confident that no one would know the difference. They very likely reasoned – the amount that they actually gave was itself a generous and surely sacrificial gift in itself. It was probably more than anyone thought was reasonable. It was an extravagant gift. But it's clear that they wanted the Apostles and probably the whole congregation to believe they had sold everything to give it to the Lord.

Now, we know from the outcome of these events that greed is indeed a deadly sin.

But notice how greed is present in their choices. Their gift was a means to an end. Either the amount they withheld was a lack of faith, an act of self-preservation, a controlling act that would ensure that their needs were met... or their lifestyle preserved. Or the gift was a means to gain something from the apostles or the community – favor, a special prayer that would benefit them, recognition. So, to mask their greed, they lied. And as Peter said to them, You have lied not only to me, but to God the Holy Spirit who had not only disclosed to Peter the sin, but also the judgment that God would carry out.

One of my best pastoral colleagues, when he was an assistant pastor fresh out of seminary, was tasked by the elders to deal pastorally with a woman who had embezzled several thousand dollars from the church. He sat down with her and said, "I have no way of knowing how God will deal with you, but let me share with you one instance of people who sinned against him by being greedy with the church's money." And he read her our text.

How then, can we hold... and let go of our possessions in such a way that we are truly content with what we have and who we are?

The antidote to greed is generosity. Greed is corrupted and distorted generosity.

As Graham Tomlin notes, Generosity sets limits on what we acquire, and it introduces a vitally important factor: the needs of other people who might be the recipients of our generosity.

I limit what I allocate for myself that I might let go of the rest for the benefit of others.

Perhaps you've heard people criticize the government's using tax dollars for food, health care, or housing. "That's socialism," people complain – "Washington is taking my money and giving it to someone who didn't earn it!" No, I'm not here to argue economics with you. But I want to emphasize 2 words: "my money." Is it? For us as Christians the last word on how we handle our stuff, "it's mine!"

How then, do we learn generosity? How do we learn a liberality of giving, a freedom with our possessions?

A. Wonder... be amazed at the generosity of God in Christ.

Several years ago one of our New Life mom's posted on Facebook that she heard her daughter playing outside and bellowing at the top of her lungs a song we had just sung in worship, "May I never lose the wonder, the wonder of the Cross."

Paul writes to his friends in Philippi:

Have this mind... have this attitude among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)

The value of thinking about the love of God in Christ, the mystery of the Incarnation, his life, death, resurrection, and ascension... is that it evokes generosity – it puts our lives and sacrifice in perspective.

Jesus stepped away from what has been his right for all eternity – the glory of the throne of heaven, the perfect and sublime society of God, the fullness of joy...

He emptied himself – not by giving away his divinity, but by the humility, the stooping low to add to himself our nature. To become fully human.

He did not clutch and grasp at his divinity – he was not controlled by fear even as he placed himself fully at the disposal of the Father. His prayer in the garden was the prayer he prayed every day of his life: Not my will, but may your will be done.

He did not grasp at his divinity to persuade people that he wasn't just some kid from Nazareth, the son of that carpenter, Joseph. In so many ways we struggle to be known – we reach and grasp at so many things (approval, accomplishment, appearance, possessions) as a way of proving ourselves... as a way of being understood. But Jesus was for the whole of his life misunderstood. Even his parents didn't fully understand, as Jesus gently chides his mother when she retrieves him from the temple. Even his disciples didn't fully understand, as he gently chided them, "Have I been with you so long, you still don't understand."

Who is this so weak and helpless? It is the Lord of heaven and earth who humbled himself with an immeasurable generosity to give to us what we could never have apart from his gift of grace.

“Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

The one who possessed everything made himself nothing that we might have everything in him. He didn’t grasp at his infinite wealth, but opened his hand and gave.

The generosity we express is but a faint echo of his immeasurable unselfishness.

This is the great metaphor for us to keep in mind as we learn generosity

Greed is the clenched fist... but generosity is the open hand

How do we learn generosity?

A. We cultivate amazement at our Lord’s gift of himself.

B. We learn to view all of life as gift.

This is the heart of stewardship.

As Paul asks his friends in Corinth, “What do you have that you did not receive?”

The world... life... everything in my hands... salvation... it is all gift. It is all the generosity of infinite love.

A gift is given to be enjoyed by the recipient. It is also given as a means of grace.

We are to enjoy God’s good gifts. There needs to be a place in our lives for both material or financial feasting and fasting. We create and buy art and there are times of excess that flow from joy and worship.

But we are also entrusted with God’s gifts so that his grace can be mediated through you and me to others. Too often we think that God’s provision rains magically from heaven. But most often, it comes through the mercy and kindness and generosity of those with whom God has entrusted that provision. God has entrusted to you his provision for the person sitting next to you or to your neighbor.

But the givers often don’t know it – they have a humble self-forgetfulness. Do you remember the question asked by the righteous who stand before God, “When did we see you hungry, in prison, sick, naked, alone?” We were just going about our lives... living with an open hand, showing the generosity that has been lavished upon us.

The generous, according to Aquinas, are “ready to give with pleasure . . . when and where they ought” with no thought that their actions are of great spiritual importance. Generosity is woven into the back and forth rhythms of everyday life.

A. We cultivate amazement at our Lord’s gift of himself.

B. We learn to view all of life as gift.

C. We learn to give deliberately and routinely.

There is one final way that we learn generosity. It is to tithe. By that, I mean to give in a disciplined and regular way. A tithe is often thought of as a 10th of our income – that

percentage is used in the Old Testament. I'm less concerned about the percentage. I'm more concerned that we learn to give as a cultivated habit of the heart.

Our giving should be in faith, believing that God uses and honors it... and believing that God will provide what we need. Our provision comes from his generosity and his faithfulness, not from our stash of stuff.

Our giving should be sacrificial, a sacrificial act of faith, entrusting our lives to God's care and the sufficiency of his provision. Giving is an act of trust. It should be something we think twice about because we realize that this disciplined giving costs us something. We think, we know what we intend, and we say "yes, I'll do it."

Our giving should be regular. It's a routine rhythm of our lives as followers of Christ

Our giving should be joyful even as Christ sacrificed his life for the joy set before him... a joyful overflow of love for one another and the world.

Our giving should be prayerful asking God's Spirit to give us insight into the needs of the Church and individuals in our lives.... a prayer for him to enlarge our hearts.

Our giving should always include our local fellowship where we contribute with all our gifts of time, and talents, and resources.

Our giving should be quiet – not ostentatious or flashy, not to be seen by other people. Sometimes that can't be helped, but when your giving is recognized, thanks always goes in 2 directions: to the Divine Giver and to the human giver. Both are engaged in the giving, and part of the discipline of giving is learning to say Thank you to the Lord for his provision, and thank you to one through whom that provision came to you.

Our giving should be prioritized. There are countless worthy opportunities for us to give all around us every day if we have eyes to see. But we are first the family of God – our first loyalties have been transferred from our biological families to our unity in Christ as his body. Our giving to the Church and our work in the world should come first so that we as a lamp set on a stand, a city set on a hill, can be the heart and hands of Jesus here in our community... wherever we are.

And lastly, our giving should be personal. That is, we give ourselves. Have you considered that it may be greedy just to write a check or send money when what's really needed is to give yourself, your time and talents. We pray for and send money to the pregnancy center, the food pantry, the homeless shelter. But do you hear the Spirit nudging you to serve, with children, in the kitchen, in the neighborhood, at the pregnancy center, the food kitchen, the homeless shelter. Are we willing to be generous with our selves... or are we greedy?

Greed – if we are living with a clenched fist or a cold closed heart, we will hoard not only our possessions but also our lives to the point that we squeeze the joy and the life out of them... and we wither and die.

Or we live with an open hand – receiving of God's grace, and giving ourselves away even as Christ gave himself for us to bear our sin and give us his life forever.