

## **“THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS”**

### **GREED**

Today in our series on the seven deadly sins we come to the sixth sin – greed. The 1980s was called the decade of greed, and in the mid-80s I lived in Dallas, Texas at the same time the TV show *Dallas* was on, and J.R. Ewing became famous as the epitome of greed. I liked living in Dallas at the time because the TV show was not far from reality and I was the recipient of trickle-down economics. I was a poor seminary student, and my philosophy, and the philosophy of every other seminary student, was to find rich people and do whatever they needed done.

During one school year a friend and I lived in an affluent neighborhood in Dallas called Highland Park. We lived in a garage apartment behind a big mansion, and helped take care of the estate in exchange for rent. The man we worked for owned a sporting goods franchise and had six season tickets – courtside seats – for the Dallas Mavericks NBA team. Every so often he would give me and my roommate these tickets, and one time we got tickets to see Dr J. and the Philadelphia 76’s play.

Instead of asking four friends to go with us, we decided instead to scalp all six tickets and make some money. We went down to Reunion Arena – I took three tickets and my roommate took three and we went looking for buyers. The first person I talked to offered me \$50 a ticket. 50, 50, 50... that’s \$150. I said, “Deal,” and was all excited to tell my friend the good news. A few seconds later he came running up to me and said, “I just had some guy offer me \$150 a ticket, and he wants to buy all six. \$150 times 6 was \$900. One minute I was excited and happy to get \$150, but when I learned I could have had much more, I was completely bummed. That’s how greed works – no matter how much you have, it’s never enough, and instead of being thankful for what you have, you’re discontent that you don’t have more.

Like each of the seven deadly sins, greed is an internal sin of the heart that can dominate our lives and keep us from fulfilling God’s purposes for our lives. This morning we to explore and understand three things about greed: what it is, what it does to us, and what we can do to be free from it.

Greed, like the other sins, is about excess. Greed is an excessive desire for and pursuit of the material things of this world. As we’ve seen in looking at the other seven sins, desires are not wrong – God has created us with desires and passions that drive us to live life fully and be productive. Desires become sinful when they exceed their God-given boundaries and limitations, and control us. Greed is the consuming desire to have more money or things, and goes hand in hand with covetousness. We see something we don’t have, we develop a strong desire to have it, and devote our time and energy in trying to obtain it.

I watched a documentary recently about William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper tycoon whose entire life was consumed with greed. He was one the wealthiest men in the world, but he was never satisfied, and his spending was legendary. Hearst especially liked accumulating artwork of any and every kind, and one day as he was looking through a book of famous artwork, a certain painting caught his eye. He immediately called for his aides and said, “I want this painting for my collection. Find it and buy it.” His aides immediately set out to find the artwork, and couldn’t find it anywhere. When Hearst threatened to fire them, they redoubled their efforts and three months later they said, “We found it. You already own it. It’s in one of your warehouses.”

We usually think of rich people as being greedy, but poor people can be just as greedy, wanting what they don't have. Some years ago, U.S. News and World Report magazine featured a story about the American dream, and as part of the story, they took a poll asking this question: "How much income would it take for you to fulfill the American dream? How much would it take for you to be satisfied?" The article revealed that no matter how much a person makes, they think they need about twice as much more. Those with incomes of under \$25,000 said it would take \$54,000 to fulfill the American dream – over twice what they made. Those who made \$100,000 said it would take \$192,000 to fulfill their version of the American dream.

The Bible never says that it's wrong to be rich or to own things – several godly people in the Bible were wealthy, and God gave them the ability to make money which they in turn gave to the Lord's work. The Bible doesn't say that it's wrong to save money or have a retirement plan – the book of Proverbs talks about the wisdom of saving and planning ahead. Nor does the Bible say that it's wrong to enjoy possessions – 1 Timothy 6:17 says that God has given us all things to enjoy. It's not wrong to possess things as long as things do not possess us – when the desire for material things consumes our time and attention and energy away from what matters for eternity.

Greed is a very destructive force and the Bible gives several strong warnings about what it does to us. To start with, **greed can keep you from going to heaven.** 1 Corinthians 6:10 says that greedy people will not inherit the kingdom of God. In Matthew 19 the rich young ruler asked Jesus, "What must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus said, "Keep the Ten Commandments." The rich young ruler said, "I've done that. What more must I do?" Jesus said, "Go sell all your possessions and give to the poor." Jesus knew that if the young man did not let go of his greed, he would not be able to receive the free gift of salvation that Jesus offered.

Jesus went on to say, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:23–24). Anyone can go to heaven if they repent of their sin and trust Christ, but having wealth can be a huge barrier to faith because a rich person, who has everything he wants, doesn't sense his need for Christ. Added to this is the fact the more he has the more preoccupied he is in taking care of what he has and protecting it, and he doesn't have time to think about the more important matters of God and eternity.

Jesus said, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, yet lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). What good is it if you get all the things you want, only to die without Christ and leave everything here on earth? What good is having money and possessions if your soul is not prepared for eternity? A person's soul is worth more than the whole world. The material things of this world will fade away, but the human soul is eternal. Don't let greed keep you from going to heaven.

Not only can greed keep you from heaven, but secondly, it **keeps you from enjoying life.** In Luke 12:15 Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Jesus says. "There's more to life than the accumulation of wealth. If your desire for things is the motivating force in your life, then you'll never be happy."

If material things could satisfy, Solomon would have been the happiest man on earth. He had everything – a fortune in gold and silver, houses, and gardens and parks, massive herds and flocks – Solomon says he “denied himself nothing his eyes desired.” And yet he said, “It’s all meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” We think, “I’d like to give it a try – I’d be happy if I had this or that – but Solomon says, “Take it from me – it won’t make you happy.”

In Ecclesiastes 5:10 he says, “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless.” The more you love money, the less it satisfies. The more you focus on it, the less it delivers. Jim Carrey, the comedian, said, “I wish everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.”

David Myers, a professor at Hope College, spent six years examining hundreds of studies on happiness and concluded that once you get past living in poverty, money becomes more of a burden than a help. He said, “Once a person achieves a certain level of wealth and purchase all that they desire, they adapt to it, and takes new increments, a faster computer, a bigger TV screen, a grander vacation, or whatever it is to duplicate the joy that the initial purchase gained for them.”

God knows this and that’s why He warns us over and over in scripture to not look to the things of this world for satisfaction, because it will leave you empty. True happiness is found only in a relationship with Christ, who fills us the things we’re really looking for, such as love and joy and peace and fulfillment and meaning. In John 4:14 He told the woman at the well who was seeking fulfillment, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Don’t waste valuable time and energy pursuing the material things of this world that can never satisfy, come to Christ, and in Him you will have a constant source of life and satisfaction.

Greed not only can keep you from heaven, and keep you from enjoying life, but third, **it makes you miserable.** 1 Timothy 6:10 Paul tells Timothy, “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” Paul says, “Watch out – once you fall in love with money, it’s going to pierce you with many griefs.

Money can solve problems, but it also brings on more problems. Proverbs 13:8 says, “A man’s riches may ransom his life, but a poor man hears no threats.” A poor man never worries about being kidnapped or having thieves breaking in to his house, but riches bring about additional worries. Being kidnapped never worries the poor man.

Ecclesiastes 5:12 says, “The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether they eat little or much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep.” The person who puts in a full day’s work and earns enough money to take care of his needs, goes home at night and sleeps well. Money does not cause him anxiety because he’s not preoccupied with money. But the rich man who loves money, who thinks about money, who can’t get enough money, lays awake at night. He’s constantly thinking about his next business deal, his next acquisition, and how to protect what he has, and he has no peace of mind.

Billionaire Ross Perot said, “Just remember if you get lucky, if you make a lot of money, if you get out and buy a lot of stuff, it’s going to break. You’ve got the biggest, fanciest mansion in the world, it has air conditioning, and it’s got a pool – just think of all the pumps that are going to go out. Or go down to the yacht basin, any place in the world. Nobody is smiling and I’ll tell you why: something broke that morning. The generator’s out or the microwave oven doesn’t work. Things just don’t bring happiness.”

Greed is a corrosive and destructive force that can keep you from eternal life, it can keep you from enjoying true satisfaction in Christ, and it can weigh you down with many griefs. What, then, do we do about greed? How do we slay this deadly sin? As with all the seven deadly sins, eradicating it is a work of the Holy Spirit, who lives in those who have repented of their sin and turned to Christ for salvation. When Christ comes into your life, He makes you a new creation and give you new desires. As you walk daily with the Lord, you slowly change. Colossians 3 says we are to put off the old sinful nature that once ruled us and put on the new virtues – the new traits – that have been given to us through Christ.

In God’s Word we find four virtues we are to put on and practice that over time will replace greed and free us from its grip. The first virtue we need to put on and practice is **contentment**. Greed disappears when we learn to be content with what we have. In Philippians 4:11-12 Paul says, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

Contentment is being satisfied with the way things are – with the circumstances you find yourself in. Paul says, “I’ve learned to be content with whatever life hands me, whether I’m well fed or hungry, whether I have much or little, I have learned to be content.” Paul learned, as we all do over time, that contentment does not depend on your circumstances, but on your attitude. Contentment doesn’t need more of something to be happy... “If I just had more money” ... “If I just had a bigger house” ... “If I just had a newer truck.” Contentment is not dependent on what you have or don’t have, but is a settled attitude of satisfaction within you that does not change despite your circumstances.

Paul gave young Timothy some great counsel when he said, “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

Closely linked to contentment, secondly, is the virtue of **trust**. Being content means that you put our trust and confidence in God to take care of your needs. Many of the worries and concerns we have revolve around money – “Will I have enough to get the bills paid? Will I have enough to send the kids to college or enough to retire? What if I lose my job or become disabled or the economy tanks?” Our human tendency when worried is to scramble and work and plan and solve, but God says “trust.”

1 Timothy 6:17 says, “Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment” (NLT). Paul says, “Don’t put your trust in money because it’s unreliable – you can lose it all in the stock market or a bad investment, your health can take a turn for the worse and all your money goes to medical bills, or a terrorist attack can cripple the economy. Don’t put your trust in money – put your trust in the God of the universe.”

A big part of overcoming greed is trusting God daily to take care of your needs. This was the lesson God taught the Israelites when were stuck in the wilderness without food, and when they cried out for food, He graciously provided them manna from heaven. All the bread they needed rained down from heaven and they were satisfied. But they said, “What about tomorrow? How do we know there will be food tomorrow? Maybe we should stockpile some bread to make sure we’ll have enough.” But God said, “Trust me. Take what you need for today, and trust me to give you what you need tomorrow.”

Jesus knew that our tendency to worry instead of trust. In the Sermon on the Mount He said, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:31-34). Greed begins to dissipate when we learn to stop worrying and trust God. It doesn’t mean that we stop working or stop planning or stop saving, but we do so in a posture of trust and not worry.

A third virtue we need to put on and practice to be free of greed is the virtue of **gratitude**. The more thankful you are, the less greedy you’ll be. When the Children of Israel were on the verge of entering the Promised Land, God described the abundance of the land – it was a land of milk and honey, bursting with wheat and barley, fig trees, and olives, and with flock and herds. In Deuteronomy 8:10-11a He says, “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God.”

God could have written this to Americans because we really have it good. No matter what your economic status is, compared to the rest of the world, we’re all rich. There’s a test you can take online, I took a while back, to see how you compare in wealth to the rest of the world. I entered in my net salary, my home equity, and my investments and debts, and discovered that I’m in the top 10% richest people in the world. Who knew? Since I’m not much different than you, most of us here today, just by virtue of living in America, having a roof over our head, and eating three meals a day, having a phone and a car, are among the richest people in the world. To be greedy for more is an insult to God.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Gratitude is a ready response to express appreciation to God for everything – the good and the bad. It’s the attitude that just being alive is a gift from God, and having an attitude of gratitude makes greed look incredibly selfish and evil.

That leads to a fourth virtue that eradicates greed and that is **generosity**. One of the best ways to be free of greed is to give – to release what you have and invest it in what matters for eternity. The irony is that the more you keep, the more empty you become, but the more you give, the more filled you are with satisfaction that your helping others and investing in what is eternal. In Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus gives the greatest financial advice you’ll ever hear. He says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19-20).

Jesus presents two simple investment plans – you can store up treasures on earth or you can store up treasures in heaven. Investing in earthly treasures has a great payoff initially, but it is temporary. But investing your treasures in heaven will pay eternal dividends.

The New Testament instructs believers to get in the habit of setting aside a sum of money, in keeping with your income, and give it to the local church to help spread the gospel and minister to people. This week I read about a poll conducted just this fall – very current – that revealed that only 13% of professing Christians regularly give 10% of their income. What’s even more astonishing is that half of professing believers give less than 1% of their income to church or charity. I don’t think that’s true of our church, praise God, this poll shows how strong a grip the treasures of this world can have on our hearts.

Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). Jesus says, “Either God owns you or things own you. Where you lay up your treasures will ultimately govern your life. You must decide if you’re going to live for God or live for money.”

In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus gives each servant a different amount of capital to invest in the kingdom, and each servant will be held accountable for what they’ve done with what they’ve been given. “To whom much has been given,” Jesus said, “much will be required.”

John Wesley had a great philosophy on wealth. He said that every Christian should make all they can, save all they can, and give all they can. There is nothing wrong with making a lot of money, because we have more to invest in God’s kingdom. There is nothing wrong with common sense saving, as long as we don’t hoard or stockpile what we have. And the goal is to give as much as we can away, so when we get to heaven, we will reap a rich return on our investment.

- When we learn to be content, greed goes away.
- When we trust God to provide for our needs and stop worrying about tomorrow, greed goes away.
- When we practice gratitude and focus on all we do have, greed goes away.
- And when we are generous, greed no longer has a hold on us.
- When we replace the deadly sin of greed with the life-giving qualities of the Spirit, life is more enjoyable and we are free to do all that God purposed for us to do on earth.