

Seven Deadly Sins: Greed

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Deuteronomy 8:6-18

Philippians 2:5-8

This is the second in our series of sermons on the 7 deadly sins and today we are going to talk about greed. What I want us to understand about greed - and this is true of all of the deadly sins – is that Greed is a disordered love. All of these 7 major categories of sin represent love that's gone wrong; love that's misplaced. Love is like a circulatory system that's meant to flow and all these sins are like clots and blockages. And that's what makes them so destructive. In the Christian way of looking at a person we are creatures who are made to love. God's Love created us and His love is meant to be the animating force of our lives. The goal of your moral life is learning the craft of love. Every day of my life I'm just trying to get a little better at the craft of love. I'm trying to get a little better at loving my family, I'm trying to get a little better at loving the people around me, and I'm trying to get a little better at loving God. I want my work, my leisure time, my conversations to somehow express the joy and love of Jesus. I'll bet that's a pretty good description of what you're trying to do too. Every day, you are trying to get better at the craft of love. And this is, of course, just how Jesus described our life. How did he sum up the commandments? *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself."* It's all about learning the craft of Christ's love.

It's a complicated craft. There are lots of ways it can go wrong. Greed is one of those ways. Greed messes up our loves because it specifically distorts our relationship with money and things. When we are greedy, our love of money and things becomes too big and as a result all of our loves get distorted and confused. An excessive love of money and things clogs the arteries of love; messes up the whole system.

Greed is a notoriously hard sin to self-diagnose. I've had people who have come to me and struggle with lust, I've had people confess their anger, and folks admit struggles with envy. I've never had a person confess greed. Ironically, we have no trouble recognizing greed in others. We're really good at pointing to other people who spend their money on the most ridiculous things! Of course that comparison is precisely what hides this sin in ourselves. We always compare up to someone who is "worse" than we are, someone who makes our consumption habits look moderate and restrained. But Greed is more prevalent than you think. Let me ask you a few diagnostic questions: How many sweaters and/or sweatshirts do you have in your closet that you haven't worn yet this fall or winter? When you give to the church, do you ever find yourself grousing about other people who obviously don't give their fair share. Have you ever replaced a perfectly good appliance in your kitchen because you were updating the kitchen? Have you ever replaced a perfectly good club in your golf bag because the new models look really cool? Have you ever spent more than an hour grazing through Pinterest, or online stores, or magazines just looking at cool stuff? Have you gone shopping because you were a little bored and you knew that shopping would raise your spirits? If any or all of those questions make you uncomfortable, you may have some greed clogging the arteries of your love. It can happen easily. In fact of all the 7 deadly sins greed is the easiest one to make into an idol. Paul makes a point of that in Colossians 3:5. He lists all sorts of old, dead practices that a person must put off when they are one with Jesus. But when he mentions greed, he throws in a quick aside: he says

get rid of greed “*which is idolatry!*” It’s like Paul knows that greed is prone to take God’s place on the throne of our lives. In this Paul follows Jesus, who says you cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money; you cannot serve God and Mammon. Greed has unique potential to become your master because greed promises you that money can give you all the things you want in a God. Money says, I can give you security. I can shelter you under my wings. I can hire you lawyers who will overcome your enemies, and doctors to cover you from the deadly pestilence. Money says, I can give you status. James knew that. In chapter 2 of his letter he was really angry with church people who showed favoritism to the rich. Money says, I can give you romance: money has always had the power to get you more than your share of romantic attention. Money even says, I can give you paradise. You don’t have to wait till you die; I can give you paradise right now: an all-inclusive resort with a sandy beach and all manner of earthly pleasures. Money’s not lying when it offers these things. It can deliver these weak substitutes for God’s promises. And so people go all in for greed. They pursue money and things thinking that they will find salvation, but find instead that their lives have been distorted and they are miserable.

How do we prevent greed from weaseling its way onto the throne of our lives? How can we prevent excessive affection for money and things from clogging the arteries of our love? Two things here. Preventing greed means always remembering where your money and your stuff is from, and what it’s for. We fall into greed when we forget where our wealth comes from and what it’s for.

The passage I read from Deuteronomy lays bare the danger of forgetting where your wealth is from. Moses tells the Israelites, “*When you’re settled in the promised land and you are sitting on your back patio, drinking a cool glass of lemonade in the afternoon sun; your orchards spread out in front of you, the fig trees and grape vines all bursting with fruit, your children frolicking and laughing in the in-ground pool, your brand new pick-up truck gleaming in the driveway, remember the God who rescued you from the wilderness.*” You may say to yourself, my power and the strength of my hands have produced all this for me. But remember the Lord your God! He gave you this land and he gave you the ability to produce wealth.” Notice: Moses does not begrudge the Israelites their nice house and their new truck and their in-ground pool; he just wants to make very sure that they don’t forget where this all came from. God gave them both the land and the ability to bring wealth from it!

Sometimes in our society you hear people, even Christian people, saying things like this about their money and their stuff: “This is my hard-earned stuff. This is my hard-earned money. It’s my business what I do with my hard-earned money and my hard-earned stuff.” You hear people say things like that quite a lot these days, and they use this attitude as a premise for all kinds of behaviors and philosophies. That sounds a lot like verse 17. “*My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.*” God has a different view of the matter: *It is He who gives you the land and the ability to produce wealth on it.* Of course there is a sense in which things are ours and we can be proud of our possessions.

A young married couple ties the knot. They don’t have much money, but they dream of owning a home someday. So they work and work and save and save. After 5 years of scrimping and saving they finally buy a small starter home in a simple neighborhood. Their friends help them move in, and at the end of the moving day, after their friends have all left they flop down in their living room on their couch and they say to each other “Honey we did it! It’s ours!” They congratulate each other on their accomplishment. That’s perfectly appropriate. There is a sense of ownership and property that the Bible guards. It’s part of why one of the ten commandments says, you shall

not steal. But even that home is not from them. It is God's gift. At some point, after congratulating each other for their accomplishment, that couple will want to take each other's hands and join in prayer to thank the Lord who gave them the ability to produce this wealth. This house and everything they have is grace, and if that's forgotten, if they look at their house and their stuff as pure achievement, I promise you the circulatory system of their love will start to clog with greed.

Avoiding greed also involves remembering what your stuff is for. What is the purpose of your money and your things? Well let's think about that. A clue to what money is for is found in that common human experience that we'll call the new stuff tingle. When you buy a new thing, especially if that purchase is in your area of interest, you get a little burst of ownership pleasure. If you're a clothes person, it feels good the first time you walk out of the house in your new sweater. If you are a saving person, you get a little buzz when you see that number in your 401 K take another step. If you are a decorating person, you get that buzz when you see how that new backsplash just brings the whole kitchen together. Sometimes the new stuff tingle can last quite a long time. After living with old and crummy fridges our entire married life, Linda and I got a new fridge over a year ago and I don't mind admitting to you that when I open the doors I sometimes still get a little lift.

That new stuff tingle is strong enough that people start to think that this is what money and stuff are for. And they start to go from purchase to purchase so that they can experience that little rush of well-being. 'My money and my stuff are for me and my pleasure.' But there is a better and a deeper joy than the new stuff tingle. A woodworking hobbyist has a daughter who is getting married and he decides that for her wedding gift he will make his daughter a table. He wants it to be a surprise, so he doesn't tell her. He subtly finds out what kind of style she likes best and he makes it in just that style. He turns the legs on his lathe. He finds some really nicely grained wood for the top. And at the head of the table, on the side, he takes the time to carve the name of his daughter and the name of her new husband, the year of their birth and above all of it, a cross. It's just a small carving but he makes sure it's perfect. How excited do you think that father will be to give that table to his daughter on her wedding day? The joy he will get from giving that table will far outshine the tingle he could ever get from buying or making something for himself. And just think how much love is circulated by this man who has used his stuff and his money and his ability to bless someone else. The differences in those experiences is not trivial. It tells us what our stuff is for. Our money and our stuff is for blessing others and circulating love in their lives. It's part of the craft of love.

And more than that, the difference in those experiences points us to the truth at the center of the universe; the love of and grace of a God who is constantly pouring himself for us. Look deeply beneath the truth behind the relative size of those two jolts of joy and you will see the cross of Jesus Christ, and the love that God the father has circulated in this universe in His Son. The cross tells us what our stuff is for. Because when we look at the cross we are reminded of what we heard in Philippians 2. We are reminded of *Jesus Christ who was in very nature God* – he had all of the stuff, including Godhood. *But he did not consider equality with God as a thing to be grasped.* He did not say "MINE." *Instead he emptied himself taking the form of a servant. And being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.* He gave up all his stuff for us and for our salvation. Because the greatest joy he and his Father have is not in having this power for themselves, the greatest joy he and his heavenly Father could have is to pour out the gift of salvation for his beloved children. And just

think how much love has been circulated into our life by this great gift. It's enough to make all things new.

If you want to know how to practice the craft of love, and if you want to know what our stuff is for, there is no better place to look than the cross. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.

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