

The Seven Deadly Sins: Avarice

In the name of him who became poor and needy that through him we might abound in heavenly treasures, dear friends in Christ: In our continuing series of meditations on the Seven Deadly Sins we come this evening to sin of avarice – or, as we'd be more likely to say it, greed. And it should be stated from the very start that greed is, like the sins of gluttony and lust, which we've already discussed, a sin of excess. To be sure, there's nothing wrong with possessing material goods, monetary wealth, or having authority and influence over others. There's nothing wrong with having these things in great abundance. And there's nothing wrong with desiring to acquire more of these things. If you want to work toward improving your standard of living or increasing your level of authority—especially if you have a gift for exercising it, go for it. And we could take it a step further: it's perfectly okay to desire things recognized primarily for their high quality or aesthetic value – things that aren't necessities, per se; but are what we would call luxuries. There's no problem with any of this.

Not at all: The Lord God filled this world with good things. He meant for us to use and enjoy them. And he delights in giving good gifts to his children. Think of the ancient Hebrews. It was the Lord's will to give them the land of Israel as their earthly inheritance, a land that he consistently described as a rich land flowing with milk and honey. He wanted his people to be prosperous and for them to enjoy the good things in life. Or we could look at some of the Bible's great heroes of faith like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, David, and Solomon. All of them were quite wealthy by the standards of their day – Solomon in particular was fabulously so. Some of them were very powerful too. But never do we hear of the Lord taking them to task for the sin of greed. Other sins, yes; but greed, no. So, just because someone is wealthy, powerful, or ambitious doesn't mean that they're greedy. And conversely, just because someone is poor, powerless, or apathetic doesn't mean that they're *not* guilty of the sin of greed.

That's because while greed has as its object things like wealth, possessions, and power, it's actually a sin of the heart. So it really doesn't matter how much or little of these things you have; but rather what thoughts and attitude you have toward them. Specifically, greed is marked by some or all of the following characteristics:

First and foremost, greed typically involves an insatiable desire to acquire ever more of whatever it is that it's after. For the greedy person there's never enough. Never. If he achieves some goal he has set for himself – some amount of money or quantity of property, say – as soon as he arrives at the goal, he immediately discovers that he set the target too low. This won't do. I must have more.

This craving for more is often accompanied by anxiety: the fear of what might happen in the future that would cause a catastrophic loss. What if a crisis comes along? What if there's a shortage? Or what if a disaster strikes? Then I won't have enough to get by – or at least not enough to maintain the standard of living I desire. These fears can be quite unreasonable and exaggerated, especially if the person has already acquired a great deal. But whether there's fear there or not, a person infected with greed will feel a decided lack of contentment with what he already has, a deep sense of dissatisfaction with his present situation, which leads him to be constantly scheming about how to improve it – by ethical means, or perhaps means that are less than ethical.

Either way, greed – which is selfishness with respect to material goods – will certainly involve a lack of concern for others. In the pursuit of gain there may be a willingness to step on other people or take unfair advantage of them, a cut-throat attitude in business dealings of kill or be killed. For the greedy person life can be like the board game *Monopoly*, in which the goal is not just for a player to do well for himself, he's also out to destroy the competition. Other people are seen as a means to the end. They're not valued as individuals; but as tools. If you can help me in my pursuit of gain, then you're important to me; if not, get out of my way. And so with greed there's no compassion for the needy. They are dead beats and derelicts, hard luck cases that deserve what they get. Why should I part with my hard-earned wealth to help them? Besides, there isn't enough to go around. If I share what I have, then I won't have enough for me and my family.

All of what I've said so far is descriptive of the sin of greed, and I think it's fair to say that we recognize it when we see it (especially in others). But greed can appear in forms that are more subtle. Just for example, it's a goal of most Americans to work toward what's called financial independence, that is, the point at which you can stop working and live the rest of your life – however long that may be – on what you've stashed away. Jesus told a story about such a fellow: a rich man who had a really good year and calculated that he could live comfortably off the proceeds. He decided to stop work and pursue a life of leisure – eat, drink, and be merry, he told himself. As you recall, though he had “made it” with respect to things material, Jesus called him a fool for neglecting the spiritual side of life. And what I would have you see is that part of his problem was his completely selfish attitude concerning the bumper crop the Lord gave him. Instead of seeing as a way to bless others, like through lower grain prices for everyone and gifts of charity to the poor, he hoarded it all for himself. And too, since he wasn't working any more, it stands to reason that many of those who made their livings working for him were out of jobs. In fact, one way to ensure that his stored grain retained its value would be to let his amazingly productive fields lie fallow. In any case, sometimes I wonder if the goal of attaining financial independence – something that as a culture we think of as good – isn't just a way we've created to justify our personal greed.

And let's be honest, in your business dealings with others, are you always looking for what's right and fair, or are you looking for deal in which you come out on top – in which you pay less for goods and services than they're actually worth? And when selling something like a house or a car, do you always reveal all the negative information you know that would drive down the fair price, or do you operate according to the principle *Caveat Emptor* – Let the buyer beware? Do you call that good business or what it is: greed?

Actually, St. Paul has another name for it. He calls it idolatry – the worship of a false god. Luther rightly said that your god is what you place you trust in. And that's the root of greed. It's born of trusting in material things rather than in the God who gives them. Whenever you look at what you have and are dissatisfied with the Lord's providence, or you worry about how you're going to survive with so little, or you fear that by sharing with someone in genuine need that there won't be enough for you, or you think it's right to take advantage of someone in a business deal, then you can be sure that it's not the Lord you're worshipping; but worldly wealth and power. This is the deadly sin of greed. We are all guilty of it. And we need to repent.

May our gracious God and Father send us his Spirit that we do so with genuine sorrow and contrite hearts. And may he turn our trust solely and completely to him who has promised to attend all of our earthly needs, and who gave all, including his very life, that we might live with him forever in heavenly glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!