

“7 – Greed”

I hear it almost everyday in my house. There will be noise coming from the TV and then a voice says, “Man, I want that!” Sometimes that voice belongs to one of my children...even 3 year old Macie is enticed to believe that her life cannot be complete without the advertised toy that will make her deliriously happy for all of 5 minutes before it is cast aside for something else. But she’s only 3, she doesn’t really know better. I’m much older, but sometimes not much wiser. Because I, too, buy into the lie. The appeal is strong, the desire is ignited and my life will not be complete until I get me one of those! You’ve been there too, right church?

Today we are going to talk about greed. It is one of the seven deadly sins, that list of vices created centuries ago that names the powerful temptations that can lead us away from the life that really is life, life in Christ, and lead us into sin and brokenness and despair. The reason we are talking about these things is not to create shame, but we are naming these sins and the effects that they have in our lives so that we can identify them in our life and invite God to help us get out of their traps and claim God’s power to resist or overcome them.

God’s desire for us is for us to have joy and life to the full. Sin brings misery and brokenness to life. Sin brings pain and distances us from the life God wants for us. So let’s look at greed and the ways it entices us into traps and keeps us from experiencing the freedom and joy of God’s grace in our lives.

Greed is the disease of never having enough. It’s desire to the excess. Greed says that having more is always better, you can never have enough. But greed is not just a matter of accumulating things. It’s an attitude of pursuing self-centered desires. Desires that in the end will not last. Greed is having our needs met and yet never being satisfied. Greed is dangerous because we lose ourselves in it.

Lee Atwater, a political strategist for President George HW Bush, died of a brain tumor at the age of 41 in 1991. When reflecting on his life just before his death he said, “The 80’s were about acquiring – acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most people ever dream of. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power I wouldn’t trade for a little more time with my family.”

Maybe you’ve seen the bumper sticker, “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” I wonder what Mr. Atwater would say about that. I think he’d say, “It’s a lie”.

We all know that old saying, “money can’t buy you happiness”. And I think we believe it to some degree, but most of us don’t live like we believe it. We chase and pursue and acquire for what reason? Because we think it will make us happy. We are sometimes easily convinced that Gordon Gekko in the movie Wall Street, was right. Greed is good.

He’s saying that the desire to have more is not a bad desire. And to some degree we all buy into that, because we all not just want more...we go get more, thinking that it will make us better, make us happy, bring fulfillment.

When we look at the world around us, we know that Mr. Gekko didn’t get it right. We’ve seen the cost of greed in the corporate greed that’s been exposed especially in the investment industry. We’ve seen the cost of greed in the banking crisis. We see the cost of greed in the credit crisis of people acquiring temporary happiness at the cost of long-term, high interest payments. We know Mr. Atwater is right, but we still buy the lie that money *can* buy us happiness.

I grew up in a preacher’s family. My parents kids raised 4 kids through the 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s on one income. The needs were met, somehow, but there wasn’t much leftover for the wants. In my formative years, you know that time when kids start noticing brands and labels and what’s cool, I felt inferior and less-than. I noticed that others had much nicer stuff, from the cars their parents drove to the houses they lived in to the brand and style of backpack and tennis shoes. And what this created in me, that still resides in me, was an excessive desire for stuff. And the deeper reality is the effect I let either having or not having stuff on my own sense of self-worth.

I’m much better about handing greed in my life than I used to be. And I’m matured enough at this point to not care so much about how others judge me by my stuff, but I have my list! Don’t you? Come, on now. I have my list of the next thing that will make me happy, the next think that will make me fulfilled, that thing I just can’t live without, the next thing that is going to make me feel successful and worthy. I have two good vehicles that fit our family needs and run well and will for years to come, but my life will not be

complete until I get a pickup! That's on the list! I don't need another TV right now, but I've got the bug for an LED TV...and the BluRay and the theater surround sound, and none of that will really make me happy til I upgrade to HD. I think the men in the room probably understand my list, and I'm hoping that you ladies can do the translation.

You have a list, right? Almost all of us do. And it doesn't matter what our income level is, we have a list and to some degree we believe, we have faith that our list will bring us some measure of happiness. And it is an illusion...it is a lie. We buy the lie.

We all know that there is no end to this quest. The list will always keep growing. And in that sense, it becomes a prison, a trap. There is always a next thing that will make us happy. If it seems to you that happiness is looming out there with your next conquest or purchase or achievement, then you are with me, caught in the trap.

I need to pause just a minute here to say that possessions are not bad. We are not bad people for having possessions. We all need possessions. Jesus said, "your heavenly father knows that you need these things" (meaning food, clothing, shelter). What's bad, what's sinful is when we allow our possessions or desire for them to possess us; when we have our needs met and yet are never satisfied; when we place our faith in those things (instead of in Christ) to bring meaning into our lives. Paul says in **I Timothy 6:10-11 (NIV), For 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 did not say that money was evil, but that the LOVE of money was a root...out of it grows destruction. What Paul noticed was that the love of money drove people away from faith and drove them to do almost anything to have more and more. He saw that they fell into a trap, the prison of greed. And Paul sees how difficult it is to get out of this trap, how people keep getting sucked back in. Jesus also gives clear warning to avoid the trap of greed. He said, **Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth....store up treasures in heaven...You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. Matthew 6:19, 24 (NIV)**

So how do we know when we cross over to greed? How do we know when desire and motivation moves to an unhealthy place? I was wondering about this for myself this week. So I found a list and thought, this list works for me...maybe it will help you. You may want to write a few of these down on your note sheet.

IT MIGHT BE GREED...

When you think having it will make you happy.

When you don't care about going into debt to get it

When getting it is motivated out of envy or image maintenance rather than out of function or practicality

When you feel entitled

When you've lost gratitude for what you do have

When your desire to give is stolen by your desire to get.

These are just some thoughts about where that line may be...and I think they are pretty accurate because I have crossed every one of these lines in my life. And when we cross these lines, there are consequences...we buy the lie and we become trapped.

I think Jesus and Paul give us these warnings because they know that at the heart of it, greed attacks us at the critical places of our identity and our security. **What greed does to our identity is that it wraps our sense of worth or value up in our earthly possessions.**

We think we own our possessions, but often, they own us. We measure our identity by the cars we drive or the homes we live in or the labels on our clothes. We call them status symbols for a reason. And we can lose who we are in Christ in the pursuit of an image we want others to see.

I have identity issues...this is where greed attacks me. I grew up in a one income family, so money was always tight. My parents did their best, and one of the things they tried to do was help us into our first car. The deal was this; when we graduated college and got a job, then they would pass along the second car, and whatever debt came with it! So in the summer of 1984, I received a 1980 Chevy Chevette and the \$130 dollar payment. Now, my car was a two door hatchback, brown, like this one, without the blue racing

stripe. I read the specs on this sporty ride this week. It pulled a whopping 70 horsepower. And I drove it for awhile.

It ran like a top, there was nothing wrong with it, and I did not need a new car. I should have driven it for another 4 years until I was out of seminary. But I just had to have a new car...not a different used car...a new car! Not because of function or practicality...simply because I knew I didn't look very cool putzing around in my little brown chevette. So I went for a 1986 Honda Civic Si. A 93 horsepower, fuel injected, 5 speed with a moonroof chick magnet! Not exactly a muscle car, but my eye liked it and in comparison to driving a chevette, it felt like a jet!

Now there's nothing wrong with buying a new car...I've bought several since (but for different reasons). Our first family car was a 96 Toyota Corolla...we drove that thing for 10 years! Anyway, the problem with this greedy little purchase of mine was that I just didn't have the margin in my meager part-time income to afford it. I remember going to pay taxes on it and wondering if the check was going to bounce. It cost me hundreds of dollars every month that should have gone to savings for seminary, and that, in turn, contributed to much larger student loans, which took years to pay off. My greed led me to a bad financial decision. But the real sin is that I was not content with what I did have and could afford. I had to have more, because I needed the identity that my car gave me. That identity, at the time, was more important to me than the contentment of being a child of God; the picture I projected to the world was more important than reflecting the image of Christ. And there are times when that is still true in my life. I still fall into the trap... greed still warps my perspective on my value, my identity.

Maybe this is your issue with greed too. But if it's not, then maybe greed attacks you in a different way. Maybe greed attacks your perspective on security. What greed can look like for you is that you become obsessed with the balances of your savings and investments. You hoard and store away to an excess to ensure your security. **What greed shortens our vision on security and makes us believe we can provide it for ourselves.** It shortens our vision from eternal and spiritual to temporary and worldly. We buy into the lie that our security lies in our own hands.

Again, like possessions, there is nothing wrong with financial planning and financial security for your family. Those are good and wise things to do. What greed does is shortens our view. It becomes a problem when the shorter view of worldly security is a higher priority in our life than the longer view of the eternal security of our soul.

Jesus told a story about this in Luke 12, about a rich man who was focused on his worldly riches to the exclusion of pursuing God's riches. ***"The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'***

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'"

"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

What Jesus is saying is that if we pursue worldly security above the wealth of the eternal security of knowing and growing in Christ-likeness, then we have sought the wrong prize. Nothing in this world, aside from a relationship with our saving God provides ultimate, eternal security.

There are two virtues that can help us avoid the traps of greed in our life. Cultivating these virtues in our lives, not just knowing them, but doing them, will help us grow in Christ-likeness and help us identify the temptations of greed.

And they are generosity and contentment. **Contentment grows out of our relationship with God** and it relates to our true identity in Christ. Contentment comes from the security of God's love for us, from the living presence of God walking through life with us. This is what we "assurance". It is trust in the

personal relationship with God, offered by God's grace to you. And contentment comes by following Christ, by living out his mission. When you are living for God's purposes, you no longer feel empty, you feel fulfilled and joyful and that life has meaning and that fills those holes in us, replaces that hunger we sometimes have to find meaning and happiness through the pursuit of worldly stuff.

Paul describes his experience of this contentment for us in Philippians, when he writes, ***"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.***

¹³I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:12-13 NIV

Generosity, the other virtue, is a vital sign for spiritual life. If you live with a sense of entitlement, then the foundation of your attitude is selfish and greedy. People who give generously of their skills, time, and their money, live from the foundation of gratitude. Living generously recognizes and appreciates the blessings you have received, and that the greatest blessing of all is the ability to bless others.

Generosity helps us from being possessed by our possessions. The virtue of generosity sees the things of this world not as possessions, but as tools for a greater purpose of sharing God's love. If you want to deepen your walk with Christ, depend more on his grace and love, and avoid traps of greed in your life, then practice extravagant generosity.

The good news is that God does not know us by what we possess. In God's reality, we are not the car we drive or the clothes we wear. God loves us for who we are, not for what we have or don't have. Jesus tells us that we find our true identity, our true self, our ultimate security not in the things of this world, but in his love and in his grace, as we live out the eternal characteristics that reflect God's nature...grace, mercy, forgiveness, hope, joy, love. Jesus wants to lead us to the life that really is life, the life God means for us live, the life of finding our true self wrapped up not in the things of this world, but in the life and love of Jesus Christ.

What I am finding in my journey of faith is that the when I feel most discontented in life are the times when my life and my identity are more oriented around my stuff and fulfilling my wants and desires; and the times I feel most content, most at peace, and most purposeful are those times when I am humble, and listening to God, and striving to live out those fruit of the spirit in Gal 5...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I remember that my identity and my security are found in God's love for me...God's claim on my life...God's mission being lived out in and through me, these are the times I feel most alive and most content.

Which story do you want to lead you through life...because we are all led through life. Do you want to buy the lie that the one with the most toys wins? Do you want to let greed tell you who you are and what will make you happy?

Or do you trust the that the fulfilled and complete life comes through the story of Jesus, who loves you because he loves you. Who shows you grace and mercy and forgiveness. Who empowers you with his spirit to push back the darkness and reveal his grace and love and light to the world around us...

You get to choose...which story will make you truly rich? Which story will lead you to find your true self and have life to the full? Which story will bring you peace and contentment and ultimate security? We can buy the lie or we can trust Jesus and believe in his promise...**Seek first his kingdom** (living out Christ-likeness) **and his righteousness** (trusting in your relationship with God) **and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:33 NIV.**