

## Defining Greed

In this chapter we continue discussing the seven deadly sins, or in our case, the seven *daily* sins. We're now talking about the deadly sin of greed. Just like with the others, we're going to define greed as it is shown in the Bible, diagnose it by looking for symptoms in our lives, and then look at ways to fight it, not with legalism, guilt, or fear, but with the Gospel.

### *The heart of the matter*

We see greed in Luke 12. An important thing to remember when looking in the Bible to define something is that the Bible is not a dictionary. We don't look up greed as a listing. We have to look at stories and context. In Luke 12, a man comes to Jesus with a problem; his greedy older brother won't share his inheritance with him. The young man says, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13). And Jesus, like a good teacher, preacher, pastor, and lover of souls, does not get wrapped up in the details of this man's legal struggles. He goes straight for the heart of the matter. He knows that what is killing the man is not a lack of inheritance; what is killing the man is greed, or covetousness.

### *The ravens and the lilies*

In response to his query, Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). Then he gives us two categories we can use to recognize greed. "Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on" (Luke 12:22). These categories are 1) anxiety for security and vitality and 2) anxiety for what you will wear. Jesus gives two real-life examples to represent these categories: the ravens and the lilies. Of the ravens, Jesus says, "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them" (Luke 12:24). Ravens aren't anxious about their life

or what they will eat. They don't have 401ks and roth IRAs. God keeps them alive as long as he wants to keep them alive. He sustains them and keeps them safe and secure.

And of the lilies, Jesus says, "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Luke 12:27). The lilies are not nearly as image-conscious as we are, yet God gives them clothes and makes them as beautiful as he sees fit. We are called in this chapter of Luke to be like the ravens and lilies, but the greedy man whining about his greedy brother is directly in contrast.

### *Greed as a preacher*

This is where we find the definition of greed. It's a human thing; it's not an animal or plant thing. It's a heart disposition of anxiety and fear that comes when we don't feel safe or pretty enough. We look to money to secure that which only God can provide, serving it as a god itself in exchange for the promise of security. The man who has a problem with his greedy older brother is poor, demonstrating that greed is not just a rich person thing. Jesus said that you can't serve both God and money because he knew that there would be temptations to serve money as a god (Luke 16:13).

If money is a god, then there must be a gospel of money as well. It would be more accurately called the gospel of greed. Every god has a message of salvation. If the message of salvation that God gives us is Jesus Christ, then the message of salvation that money preaches is greed and covetousness. In Luke 12, Jesus tells us to watch out for greed because greed is a liar that says abundant, victorious, safe, beautiful, glorious life consists in all the stuff that you surround yourself with. That's the gospel of money and greed.

If money is a god and it has a gospel, how should we compare its gospel to our gospel? Our gospel says that if you have God you have life. If you live in paradise, in the presence of God, you will flourish and reach your full potential. None of us will have life at its fullest potential until we are ultimately and finally in the presence of God. In other words,

having God is life and not having God is not life. This is exactly what the gospel of money preaches: if you have money, you have life, and if you don't have money, you don't have life. In biblical times, they didn't keep large sums of money in banks; rather, they measured wealth by how many goods someone had. Translated in this way, if you have an abundance of possessions, you have life, and if you don't have an abundance of possessions, you don't have life.

### *Getting god*

If money is a god and that god has a gospel, there must be a way of bridging the gap. God is here, you are there, and if you have God, you have life—but how *do* you get God? The Bible says we get God “by grace...through faith...not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9) We get God not because we worked for him but because God came down to earth and performed all that was necessary to bridge the gap between himself and man. But the gospel of money claims that money is life, and in order to bridge the gap—to earn your salvation, to get in the presence of this god—you have to work. Here we can see that the religion of money joins ranks with every other religion on the planet as works salvation.

How's that working for you? You work, get your money, take it to the temple—if you're a raven, your temple is the bank, and if you're a lily, your temple is the mall—and participate in the sacraments of that temple. Is the grace flowing? Or does your god, every time you serve him, *not* deliver on his promises, but say, “Go back and work a little bit more. Maybe next time.” Isn't that what he does to you? That's why Jesus says to watch out for greed. Greed's a liar. Life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions, and Jesus has to say that because we're all believing the lie that it does.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with money, banks, or malls. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with reaping from a “good hard day's work.” There's also nothing intrinsically wrong with saving up a little money for your children, being wise, finding good deals, window shopping, etc. The problem is when you are doing those good things out

of a heart that believes a false gospel. There's nothing wrong with spending money, saving, working hard, and shopping, unless you believe the gospel of greed, which says that life consists in an abundance of possessions. And if you *are* pursuing money and "stuff" out of a heart that believes the gospel of greed, it's worship of a false god.

## Diagnosing Greed

Your first reflex might be to deny that you're worshipping a false god. However, I believe each and every one of us believes the gospel of greed to some degree. We are going to look at the symptoms of greed and see if we can't find it in our own lives. Luke 12 is a chapter from the Bible from which we can observe symptoms of greed. Let's start with perhaps the most common one, and therefore easiest to talk about: anxiety. I know that every one of us has anxiety about money from time to time. Let's consider the lilies and the ravens for a moment as Jesus instructs.

### *Craving an image*

Let us first consider the lilies. They don't work or make their own clothing. They don't follow the latest fashion trends. They don't shop at the latest trendy stores. Yet they're beautiful, because God adorns them beautifully. Their beautiful image is given to them by God; they don't work for it in any way. Are you trying to purchase your image with money? That is a symptom of greed. The lily type of person tries to do this. Are you a Tommy Hilfiger or Foogoo kind of person? Are you Mac or PC? Are you Ford or Chevy? When you buy these things, are you buying a wardrobe, computer, or truck or are you buying an identity? Jesus says not to worry about that stuff. Let Jesus be your image. He'll make you more beautiful than Solomon ever dreamed.

Maybe you don't shop at all those fancy stores, trying to buy your image. Instead you shop at Goodwill. You proudly and only buy second-hand clothing and drive second-hand cars. But Jesus didn't say to watch out for a lot of money; he said to watch out for greed. There are a lot of

people who intentionally shop second-hand because they too are trying to purchase their image. But again, let Jesus be your image.

Why do you think that Kindle all of a sudden decided to promote their merchandise through supporting homosexual marriage? Why does Geiko use a Gecko? Why does E Insurance use anime? Why does Wheaties use Michael Jordan? Why do all of these particular products have these commercials that have nothing to do with the product? Because they know that young people especially are not just buying products; they're buying an identity and an image. They're buying things in order to be a part of something bigger than themselves. They're buying things because they want a sense of longing and a sense of permanence. These products are using your deep-seated anxiety for beauty and glory to sell their merchandise. This is what prophesy is. Biblical prophets use the deep-seated anxiety for security and beauty to preach their message of true salvation. Advertisers are comparable to prophets in this way, yet they don't preach a message of true or lasting salvation.

### *Craving security*

Let's now consider the raven. Ravens don't stockpile or hoard. They don't have 401ks and Roth IRAs and pension plans. They don't worry about those things at all, but God takes care of them and keeps them safe and secure and keeps them for as many days as he wants to keep them. But some of you are attempting to purchase safety and security with money. Unlike the lily type of person, you don't go to the mall. In fact, you look down on people who go to the mall. Instead, you go to the bank and stockpile money. And the bigger the stockpile gets, the safer you feel. The bigger the stack of bills gets, the more you feel you can maintain control amidst all the volatility of life. But the raven of Luke 12 looks at you and says, "Life is way too volatile and insecure for you to be able to purchase your safety and security. Let God be your safety and security and stop worshipping at the altar of an anti-savior."

### *Head held high*

Another symptom of greed is manifested in looking down on others. Either you're a raven and you look down on lilies or you're a lily and look down on ravens. For example, the older ravens look at the young lilies and call them frivolous and wrapped up in the latest fashion. And the lilies look at the ravens and say, "Those old folks are so grumpy. They can never spend a dollar." Both are characteristics of someone who believes the gospel of greed. You probably fit in one or two of them or in some degree both.

### *Holding riches loosely*

Let's move on and meditate on this particular rich fool in Luke 12. There are so many things we can say about him. One is that he's a gloater. Riches do that to you. When you get rich, you get arrogant and start to think you're good at everything. It's a snare. The rich young fool not only had a gloating problem, but also inordinate lust and greed for comfort, luxury, and leisure. He conspicuously stockpiled things for himself. He is inordinately pursuing "the good life."

Deuteronomy 14 shows different kinds of tithes and Old Testament taxes in the government of Israel. For example, every year all of Israel would take ten percent of everything they owned. Unlike what we think of as tithing, they wouldn't just take ten percent of their profits; they would take ten percent of all their network and assets. They didn't have money in banks; they had money in furniture and lands and houses and grain, and so if they couldn't carry it, they would liquidate it. They would sell it and take the money to the tabernacle and have a party—a massive nationwide celebration. That's why the psalmist said it's good to go to the house of the Lord, because there was a massive feast. The whole nation was invited, and one-tenth of the nation's spoils was spent enjoying the presence of God and the gifts that he gave them.

### *The spiritual discipline of moderation*

The bearing this has on us today is that you don't have to be a dour, gloomy, all-black-wearing Christian. In fact, I'm not sure that's even

Christian. Jesus said when you fast and make sacrifices to wash your face and don't let people see you fasting and sacrificing (Matthew 6:16-18). We're supposed to be Christians walking around with joy and happiness; we're supposed to let our lights shine, not walking around dour and gloomy. You're not supposed to be wearing black unless you're in mourning and we're not supposed to always be in mourning.

For me, it means that I don't have to feel guilty when I go on vacation, and you don't either. We can enjoy the gifts that God has given us. In fact, Paul says in his letters to Timothy that we should enjoy the good gifts of God, including food and marriage, and that to tell people to abstain from good and marriage is "doctrines of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1-4, NKJV). Turning down a gift from God in the name of "sacrifice" is not Christian. It is actually Platonic. Platonism is a philosophy that flows from the teachings of Plato, who said that the way to bridge the gap between God and man and to live life is to remove all desires and passions for things—to make sure that you don't surround yourself with *any* possessions. Buddha also said that.

On the flip side of that is Freud and Nietzsche, the philosophers who currently dominate our society. Freud said that it's futile to repress those desires. You can't repress your need for stuff and your greedy passion, and if you can't beat greed, you might as well join greed. So live it up. "Eat, drink, for tomorrow we die"—Paul says that would be true if there weren't a resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:32). That's why you hear songs on the radio saying, "I'm going to get mine, so you better get yours." That is a worldly, Freudian lifestyle. It doesn't say "Enjoy the gifts of God." It says, "Greedy grab everything you can reach. Get yours." And that's the American mindset. Buddha and Plato lost a long time ago.

Where does the Christian find themselves in all of this? It's right there in Deuteronomy 14. It's called the spiritual discipline of moderation. You take one-tenth of all your assets, you liquidate them, you bring them to the temple of the Lord, you enjoy God's good gifts, and you share with everyone. But that's only with one-tenth of your wealth. Americans have flipped that principle upside down and we spend nine-

tenths on leisure and luxury and one-tenth, maybe, on others. The key to enjoying God's gifts rightly is enjoying them in moderation.

My children and I sometimes enter into a temple in Lafayette called Toys-R-Us. I'm aware that it is a temple for some people, and if I enter thinking that life consists in the abundance of possessions, I am a worshipper just like everyone else, hoping to purchase lily-style life for my children. I am fully aware that the people around me are worshipping and also that I am capable of the same thing. My children don't watch commercials, not because we're "holy" but because we only have Netflix. But I'm happy about that because they don't know what's for sale out there. They don't get to hear the prophets of the gospel of greed constantly preaching at them, "Life consists in the abundance of these toys." But it's still deep down there, because the line between good and evil goes directly through the middle of hearts, so when they enter Toys-R-Us, the heavenly horns are sounding and there is awe.

There are multiple problems with my children when we go in, and since I'm a preacher, my kids are always getting preached at. My son on one hand keeps saying, "Daddy, can I have this? How about this? Can I have this?" And I say, "If I get you this toy, are you going to be happy, or are you going to want another one later?" And he looks at me with a smirk and says, "I'll be happy with just this." But he knows that he won't be. But when he keeps asking, I have to remind him that I am allowing him one toy and enough is enough. Do we ever tell ourselves, "Enough is enough"?

On the other hand, my daughter looks at the glamorous toys, particularly big pink jeeps, and says, "Woah, Daddy, that's probably too expensive. We probably can't afford that." I could say, "Yeah, you're right, we can't." But the truth of the matter is, "We can afford it, but we're not going to get it." We don't have to grab everything that is within reach. It's the anxiety that you're not going to be beautiful, a somebody, or safe that causes you to grab everything that you can possibly reach with the hopes that one of the things will finally save you and satiate that anxiety in your heart, but it never will. For the Christian, moderation is, "We can reach this far, but we only go this far."



## *A diagnostics test*

Now I'll list diagnostics for you. Some of these I got from other pastors and some of these I thought of as things I think are signs of someone with a greed problem. If you're exploring or new to Christianity, the good news is coming soon, so don't stop reading yet. But we have to accept the truth about ourselves before we can be healed. You might have a greed problem if...

...you're constantly struggling to climb out of debt because you purchased things you didn't need.

...when the new electronic gadget hits the shelf, you immediately buy it or immediately worry because you can't.

...money is burning a hole in your pocket.

...you spend more money on things you don't need than in service to others.

...you go shopping for things you don't need every week.

...you cheat on your taxes or do them with such a frivolous attitude that you probably are making some mistakes but you know your audit is so low that they won't check.

...you steal from your workplace.

...you're unable to go on vacation and rest or party, or you do those things too much.

...others would say that you have a greed problem if you showed them your spending habits.

...another Christian in your church that isn't your friend would say you had a greed problem if you showed them your spending habits.

...someone from another county would say you had a greed problem if you showed them your spending habits.

...you are never content with what you have but see things as half-empty instead of half-full.

...you are all hot and bothered about your private property.

...you are perpetually lonely (because greed puts you in competition with others).

...you hoard and stockpile on earth but have no treasure in heaven.

...you wolf down all your possessions, ravenous for more. (The word “greed” is an Anglo-Saxon word that means wolfing down your food.)

Do you see it in your life? We all have a money sickness. We all have a greed problem. If you see it in your life, it’s a good step, but you also have to see it as an incredibly significant sickness that is killing you. That is probably something the Holy Spirit will have to drive home for you.

We all know that it was Judas who betrayed Jesus. For thousands of years, theologians have been trying to ascribe some deeper theological reason to Judas for betraying him. Maybe he was a zealot or a political rebel and wasn’t happy that Jesus wasn’t going to finally take out the Romans and he just wanted to be on the winning team. But the Bible actually tells us that Judas’s motives were 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 26:15). What if it was one of us sitting at that table? I don’t know if I should be happy or sad that Judas was there and not me. It could have been any one of the disciples. Greed is in all our hearts, but it is a significant problem in our society especially. Our society builds a monument to greed and dresses it up with Christmas lights. That monument is right in the middle of the road of faith. It is an obstacle on your way to heaven and in your relationship with Jesus Christ. It is coming between you and your master and if you don’t beat it, it will beat you.

## **Fighting Greed**

As with the other deadly sins we’ve discussed so far, we fight greed with the gospel. Mark 10 tells the story of the rich, young ruler. In this story is the first key to beating the sin of greed. The rich, young ruler came to Jesus as a guy who had it all together, so “good” that he knew he wasn’t perfect. He went to Jesus to find that one thing he was missing.

Jesus looked into the man’s heart and knew the man’s problem was greed. So Jesus said, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). And the rich, young ruler replied that he’d been keeping the ten commandments since he was a boy. Then Jesus tested the rich, young ruler’s keeping of the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). He told him, “Go, sell

what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). But he couldn’t do it. It’s not simply that he wouldn’t do it. He was enslaved to greed. He loved his stuff more than God and was in violation of the first commandment, and *that* was the roadblock on his way to heaven and to a relationship with God.

### *The greediness of good guys*

The disciples witnessed this exchange and saw Jesus send this “good guy” away. Most churches, I’m afraid, would say something along the lines of, “If there’s one thing you’re lacking, we’re going to tell you what it is. Just do a little bit of this and God will give you the a-okay. Put a little money in the plate, say a little prayer, do a little song and dance, and everything will be okay.” But Jesus sent this “good guy” packing because of a greed problem. The disciples were perplexed. If this guy couldn’t go to heaven, who could (Mark 10:26)? Jesus, with a wink in his eye, I imagine, said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27).

### *Realizing you can’t*

If you want to fight greed, the first thing you have to understand is that you can’t. Without God’s supernatural, miraculous power in your life, called the new birth, in which he has taken out the old heart and put in a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26), you can’t fight greed and you can’t even notice it. You must be born again, and that’s not something you can do. Only God can, and you should pray for that.

### *Watching out*

Second thing is, if you’ve been born again, you are no longer under the bondage of sin and death. You can beat sin and there are some simple things you can do to help in the fight against greed. “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an

abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). What do you do when you’re on guard duty? You peer closely into the darkness to detect intruders. You peer closely into your own heart and ask, “Who goes there? Is that greed? And if you’re on guard duty in a good military unit, you’re on guard with a partner. You give them the binoculars and let them peer into your heart. Let them see if greed is out there lurking in the bushes to kill you.

Young people share their internet histories. They have their accountability partners to make sure they’re not being lustful. Why don’t we share our spending habits and make sure we’re not being greedy? We never do that. We don’t have greed accountability partners, only lust, but greed is a bigger problem. Jesus says to watch out because greed is so sneaky. You know when you’re committing adultery. It’s not a secret. Everyone knows when you’re fornicating and trying to move in with your boyfriend before you’re married. We don’t watch out for that; we *run* from that (1 Corinthians 6:18). But with greed the command is “watch out.”

### *Get in touch with reality*

One of the things involved with watching out is getting in touch with reality. When you watch a commercial, check: is that reality? When the sultry baritone voice of Allstate commercials says to elderly people who are worrying about life changes and health, “You’re in good hands.” Allstate might as well say, “We’ve got the whole world in our hands.” They’re literally trying to sell you security. When my car was totalled, I was not singing *Amazing Grace* afterwards. I didn’t feel like their covenant with me was unconditional. They’re full of it. I don’t have a particular problem with Allstate, but they do *not* have the whole world in their hands, and you are *not* “in good hands” with Allstate; they just know you’re trying to buy your security so they’re going to sell it.

Get some wisdom and get in touch with reality. Watch out for the false prophets and don’t buy lies. If you go into a new car lot, don’t believe the gospel of greed. First go to a junkyard and get a reality check. When you get this reality-check wisdom and see how the world

actually works and that these things are not going to last, you're less likely to fall like a sucker and believe the gospel of greed.

For something conceptual to help with this, Luke 12:32 says, "Fear not, little flock." You're running around so anxious with raven-style and lily-style greed. "Little flock" is a term of endearment. It means Jesus loves you. "Consider the ravens....God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds" (Luke 12:24)! If God takes care of them, he is going to take care of you. "Consider the lilies....even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass...how much more will he clothe you" (Luke 12:27-28)?

### *The Father's good pleasure*

You have a bigger problem with greed than you can ever imagine but you are also more valuable to God than you can ever imagine. You are his little flock. If you know that, you don't have to purchase your safety or your image. He values you. How much? God so loved the world that he generously gave you his son (John 3:16). He loves you more than anything else in his creation and he will not withhold any good thing from you (Romans 8:32). If that gets from your head down to your heart, you will no longer have to run around like the pagans, trying to buy security and looking to money for that which God provides because you know he loves you and he's going to provide it.

The rest of Luke 12:32 says, "For it is your father's good pleasure" to give you everything. You don't earn it or work for it. You are rich in God if you just get this down in your heart! You're rich in God on account of what Jesus Christ has done for you in his perfect life, in his death, and in his resurrection (Ephesians 2:7). That, my friends, is the concept and truth that will set you free from the bondage of greed.