

Proverbs 19:17  
Job 20:20-22  
I Corinthians 5:9-13  
II Peter 2:1-3

A YEAR TO REMEMBER  
WEEK SEVENTEEN

## GREED

(THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS)

*PRIDE*

*ENVY*

*ANGER*

*SLOTH*

### **GREED**

GLUTTONY – TEMPERANCE

LUST – LOVE

*“The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives.” (Psalm 37:21)*

Two sermons ago, two men were driving home from work. The traffic was bumper-to-bumper at 1.2 miles per hour. Seeing that it would take a while to get anywhere, each man turned to daydreaming about winning the lottery. The first man dreamed of retiring to a lovely island, a boat, a position of leisure and plenty where he would never have to worry about earning a living again. The second man dreamed of gaining a controlling interest in his company so he could build and shape it according to his own designs.

The second man, I told you, was enjoying a temptation of lust. The first man was caught in a spell of greed. Today our subject is greed, the top of the bottom three of the Seven Deadly Sins.

By the way, the second man, as he reached the far end of the bridge, began to think of all the people who worked in his company. He realized that he was quite fond of each of them, in his own way. They were not perfect but they were very important people, so he concluded that when he won the lottery and bought out the business, he would call together all the employees and they would decide together what improvements to make and how to share the profits justly between them. As the man arrived home in a wonderful mood, the whole family felt close and life seemed good that evening, for love kills lust. In caring and affection, we lose the drive for power and control over others.

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Maybe six months from now, when the man learns that lust is often more efficient and effective in this world than affection and caring, you may need to worry about him again. After all, lust would not have survived so heartily through all these millennia if it did not work – if it did not help with survival. Lust exacts a terrible price (loss of relationship, isolation, loneliness), but we are afraid to give it up because we are fairly certain that if we do, we will not survive. Lust is about power. We always want more, and rarely give up any if we can help it.

Gluttony is about the desire for gratification, the effort to satisfy the senses with quantity: excess. Once we hit that mode, there is never enough. On a world scale, it means tragedy and unspeakable suffering. Fortunately, the contemplation of other Deadly Sins removes it further from our consciousness.

Can you imagine what it would be like if we had only one major sin to worry about? There just would never be any relief! How would we ever get that one glaring fault out of our minds? We would never get to sleep. Be grateful there are seven.

Carol Matthau, wife of Walter Matthau, worried herself into a state of deep depression over her husband's health. She wrote a letter to her dear friend, Oona O'Neill, daughter of Eugene O'Neill and child bride of Charlie Chaplin. By return mail, she received a thick envelope from Oona, which she saved until she got into bed that night so she could savor the comfort and advice of her friend.

When she opened the envelope that night, all but one of the pages were blank, and something fell onto the bed, wrapped in a clump of tissue paper. When she opened the paper, her eyes could scarcely perform their duty. It was an old, exquisite diamond bracelet, obviously priceless and exceedingly beautiful.

On the page that was not blank, Oona had written: "Darling, I couldn't bear you sounding depressed, so I'm sending you this to cheer you up."

Now Carol had a new problem. How do you respond when somebody does something so completely out-of-bounds for you? So Carol was telling Felicia Lemmon (Jack Lemmon's wife), her closest California friend, about it the next day. She said she was still in a state of shock and was searching for some appropriate response, if possible, to such an extravagant gift.

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“I mean, what do you say, Felicia? What can you say?” she asked over lunch at the Swiss Cafe on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills.

Felicia was up to it. She shrugged and said, “Send her a wire. Say, ‘Still depressed. Keep ’em coming.’”

Greed, like lust and gluttony, is insatiable. Once activated, it can quickly overwhelm everything in the territory. Many stories and fairy tales are built around the theme of greed overwhelming a person once it is let loose. Most famous perhaps is the story of King Midas and how everything he touched turned to gold, and how quickly that destroyed everything, including his most precious relationships.

What is greed? What kind of mindset would send a diamond bracelet to a friend who is worried about her husband’s heart? Surely the Matthaus were rich enough that Carol did not have to worry about financial survival if Walter died. Yet the implication is that a costly gift would reassure Carol, so she did not have to worry so much about the loss of her provider. Of course, that is not stated out loud, but the symbolism is clear enough.

Felicia is scathingly humorous in suggesting, “Give the greed its head!” The two friends probably managed to jolt Carol out of her depression by their antics. I presume there was real caring underneath. At first it all sounds like “typical Hollywood,” but we recognize the themes well enough to laugh.

Lust is about power. Gluttony is about personal gratification. Greed is about fear.

The motivating force behind greed is the fear of deprivation. I must have more clothes, more money, more insurance, more of everything because maybe I will run out. Greed, like the other sins, is not usually aware of its own rationalizations. The most exploited rationalization is the one that works best, the one that reveals the real motives best: “You should buy this item because it’s a good deal.”

You cannot walk into any shopping mall in the country today without discovering that almost every store is having a sale. The fact that the lie works, despite its obvious and ludicrous character, shows that we need the lie. Our culture is desperate to find sufficient rationalizations to go on with its greed. Thus we have built a national myth that everything we buy must be at a super price so we are really saving

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money. I know one young couple who saved so much money in their first year of marriage that they are now \$12,000 in debt and trying to pay it off at credit-card interest rates.

We have countless other rationalizations as backup, of course, but the “super deal” illustrates it well enough. There are no honest prices left. You cannot walk into a car dealership anywhere and get a straight answer to a simple question: “How much is that car?” The salesman knows he must convince you that you are getting the world’s best deal and that he would go out of business if others bought at the same low price. He knows that I, the customer, will not be happy unless I believe myself to be a crook and a thief. Greed is rampant in our society. We do not need half of what we buy. We do not even *want* a quarter of what we buy, but buy we must.

When I first entered the ministry in 1959, I discovered that unless I took strong measures to prevent it, about twenty-five percent of my conversations with one member or another of my parish would be about why they had not been in church the previous Sunday. By the end of the first month, I had heard it all. By the end of the second month, I was sick of it. By the end of the third month, I was giving prizes for creative new excuses just so I would not go stark, raving mad. Then, mercifully, came the revolution. People stopped feeling like they needed to come to church out of custom and duty, and slowly the excuses became irrelevant and faded away.

Today if somebody tells me why they were not in church last Sunday, it’s just informative. They are catching me up with what’s going on with them. How pleasant! But guess what took the place of the old rationalizations? Now, if I am not adamant, I spend twenty-five percent of my conversations listening to what super deals my friends made on all their recent purchases: super lifetime memberships in health spas; curtains cheaper than the cloth they are made of; houses bankrupting the banks that are selling them.

Greed is about fear – the fear that we will not have enough to live on, or to be important to our family and friends, or to retire with, or to take care of ourselves with. Fear can always imagine endless scenarios of disaster, so enough is never enough. Kahlil Gibran said: “Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is unquenchable?” What a picture of greed!

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In Buddhism, greed is one of three hurdles of ego inflation that must be overcome before a person can attain liberation. Spirituality is utterly incompatible with greed. All the religions of the world know that. Why does our society not know that?

I am not sure, but I suspect that most of us want to be greedy for our friends and loved ones, not just for ourselves. We dream of being generous (and being loved for it). We dream of putting our children through college, or helping them buy their home, or coming through if they lose their job for a time, or getting them started in business. I bet that most of the daydreams across the country about winning the lottery are about what we want to do to impress or help those we care about. We know our hearts are in the right place, so sin cannot be a problem. We have not learned yet that Satan uses the best in our hearts to tempt us. Satan uses love to kill love, and intellect to cloud the truth, and our best motives to undo us.

Evagrius, a contemporary of Augustine, wrote: “Greed suggests to the mind a lengthy old age, inability to perform manual labor (at some future date), famines that are sure to come, sickness that will visit us, the pinch of poverty, the great shame that comes from accepting the necessities of life from others.” Hence, in our fear of these eventualities, we become more and more greedy. Interesting, again, that one who lived so long ago could speak as if he had been eavesdropping in our minds today. The issues we face are not as new as we would like to suppose, and neither are their solutions.

I caught the tail end of a marvelous program on television about how values have changed from a striving for excellence to a striving for the success that used to be a *byproduct* of excellence. Unfortunately, the program ended trying to prove that you are more likely to succeed if you go for excellence rather than success – a little reminder of the real perspective.

Generosity is the counterpart virtue to greed. All of us are already rich. Greed makes us want to be filthy rich – to have an endless supply of everything, like God – so we can give without any fear of running out. Generosity, sometimes thought of as compassion or mercy, is the antidote to greed. If we are as rich as we want to be, generosity will not be possible. Generosity implies a giving away of something we value or need or could benefit from keeping for ourselves. Nobody has to *wait* to be generous. It is a choice – an act of will. It comes from the heart.

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Of course, if we start trusting in God for all outcomes, then the fear begins to shrivel and the generosity flourishes. That is not an act of will; that is the Gospel in action. That is mercy and grace taking over and beginning to heal the sin at its source.

But we are cheating; we already know that this is what God in Christ does for us, beyond anything we can choose or supply or manage for ourselves. For now, we are merely trying to locate the Seven Deadly Sins and come to clearer awareness of how they operate in our own lives on a daily basis.

We can choose to be greedy. As with each of the sins, every time we let ourselves go into the pattern strongly, the temptation to do so is greatly strengthened and will be ten times more likely to continue. Each time we are temperate, that pattern is also strengthened, and we are much more likely to resist the temptation the next time it comes around. All the sins and virtues work on that principle.

Have I mentioned that greed is higher on the list than lust and gluttony? Fear is an even greater killer than power or excess.

Lust, gluttony, and greed are all concerned with our relationship to the outer world – the physical realities. Each of these three sins is deadly because each causes us to relate to our environment in a way that makes us miserable, unhappy, and alienated from our surroundings. The lust for power, the desire to gratify our senses, the avaricious hunger for so much wealth we can never run out – each of the three makes us alien and antagonistic to our surroundings. Moreover, the first three sins all kill relationships with other human beings and leave us isolated and alone. More subtle and devastating than that, they alienate us from God.

On the other hand, love, temperance, and generosity build up relationships, put us more in tune with our environment, and bring us toward greater peace with God. Some of this we can do something about. Some of this we can see and understand and cooperate with. But we cannot get rid of lust, gluttony, and greed just by deciding to. If it were that simple, the world would have solved all its problems a long time ago. It takes a Cross and a response – a rebirth and an Easter morning – to get any real release or freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins.

Next time, we head into the second group of three – sins that are more powerful, more subtle, and far more deadly than the first three. Isn't it good to know there is still no reason to be afraid?