

Greed

Series: *Taming the Monster Within*

Mar. 19, 2023

Luke 12:13-21

Well we're moving right along with our series called *Taming the Monster Within*, which is all about the Seven Deadly Sins— *pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust*. Of all sins, these seven have for many centuries been considered to be especially perilous, because they lead to all kinds of other sins, and they're also incredibly common to the human experience.

As our church family seeks this year to make space for joy and flourishing in Jesus, we're making space during Lent for God to search our hearts and lives for signs of these seven sins, so that by God's grace we might become freer to experience God's joy and flourishing as never before.

Let's begin today's message with a quote from Billy Graham, who once said that if you're a follower of Jesus, if you don't have a lower standard of material lifestyle than non-Christians who are at your income level, you're not giving enough.

Whoa! Take it easy there, Billy Graham! I find his statement both powerful and unsettling at the same time. What thoughts stirred in your mind, what feelings stirred in your heart when you heard it?

What is it about the suggestion of lowering our standard of material lifestyle that makes us say, "Ouch!?" That makes us say, "Hey, don't go there!" What makes the idea of giving away more of our money so very troublesome to so many of us? What makes the thought of living with less such a tough pill to swallow?

We'll keep questions like these in mind today as we explore the next of the Seven Deadly Sins— *greed*.

Greed can be defined as an excessive love or desire for money or any possession money can buy.

Why is it so easy for people—Christians included—to get caught up in greed?

Historian Tom Sine describes the rise of materialism in Western culture. Up until the 1920's, the vast majority of people were quite content if their basic human needs were met—a roof overhead, wood for the fire, food on the table, water in the well. Once people reached that point, they were satisfied, and their rate of consumption levelled off.

But it's not good for big business when consumers are content with what they already have. And so, there came a point when corporations started developing strategies to make people want more.

The fundamental scheme was as simple as it was crude: *Convince people that they have unmet needs, and then sell them products that promise to meet those needs.* Over the years, marketers have succeeded brilliantly in changing not only our wants, but our values as well. The vast majority of people—including people of faith like ourselves—have taken the bait hook, line, and sinker.

Yesterday's luxuries have become today's necessities. Why? Because in any given twenty-four hour period we're assaulted with a mountain of messages designed to persuade us that unless we purchase the newest novelty, we're missing out. We're behind. We're inadequate. Commercialism not only creates within us an appetite for more; it creates a society filled with well-trained consumers. Greed fuels the engines of commerce.

There's no one in this room who hasn't been influenced in one way or another by the false gospel of greed. Let's look into the scriptures now, and see what Jesus has to say about the subject.

If you have your Bible, please turn to Luke 12:13-21. I'll be reading from the New Living Translation.

Then someone called from the crowd, "Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father's estate with me."

Jesus replied, "Friend, who made me a judge over you to decide such things as that?" Then he said, "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own."

Then he told them a story: "A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, 'What should I do? I don't have room for all my crops.' Then he said, 'I know! I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I'll sit back and say to myself, "My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!"'

"But God said to him, 'You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?' "Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God." ¹

This passage causes me to ask myself a question: If Jesus so poignantly addressed the problem of greed in his own day, when the standard of living for the vast majority of

¹ Luke 12:13-21 (NLT)

people was very, very basic, how much more crucial is his message for us, here and now, in this society where we've been brainwashed to want more, more, more?

How can we, in a time and place such as this, avoid the pitfalls of greed that the rich fool in Jesus' story so blindly stumbled into? I think there's no better place for us to start than to cry out to God in prayer. This morning, on the basis of the passage we just read, along with some other biblical texts, I'd like to share **three prayers to combat greed**.

The first prayer is:

1. Lord, help me guard against greed!

What does Jesus say in verse 15 of our passage? "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed." These words come across even more forcefully in the original Greek than they do in English. In no uncertain terms, Jesus wants us to know that unyielding vigilance is required to prevent greed from taking root in our hearts. And how much more must this be the case given the commercialized, consumeristic society we live in? Jesus is calling us to remain alert—on the lookout for greed—which sneaks up on us in various forms.

Last month I was cooking a big pot of chili. Man, it had everything. Two kinds of beans. Tomatoes, onions, carrots. Lean ground beef. Just the right mix of spices and just the right amount of heat. Oh yeah. Many people don't realize this, but Pastor Steve can cook, baby!

Except for one thing. I got distracted with my phone and failed to stir the chili when it needed stirring. You know what happened next. It burned to the bottom of the pot. I mean, it could have been worse. I mean, the smoke detector didn't go off. I was able to salvage some the chili, but there were still some bits of char in there and it just wasn't the same as it would have been had only stirred the pot.

The same principle applies to combatting greed. You have to keep stirring against greed to keep it from getting stuck to your heart. You can't let your guard down. As Jesus says in our passage:

"Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own."²

When it comes to greed, what's at stake is not tonight's dinner. What's at stake is your *life*. When he says, "Life is not measured by how much you own," Jesus is warning us that getting caught up in greed puts you in danger of forfeiting what life—real life—is all about.

And yet many of us live as if life is measured by how much we own. So we need to pray—and let's all pray this aloud— *Lord, help me stand guard against greed*.

² Luke 12:15 (NLT)

Later in Luke’s gospel, Jesus says:

“If you cling to your life, you will lose it, and if you let your life go, you will save it.”³

It’s radically counterintuitive, but according to Jesus, you will actually find true life when you give your life away— including your money and your stuff— for the sake of God and others in Jesus’ name.

This brings us to the second prayer to combat greed:

2. Lord, help me see beyond self!

Our Bible passage in Luke 12 shows how the rich fool—his vision clouded by greed—is unable to see beyond self.

I’d like to ask you to read verses 17-19 aloud with me, and when you do, add extra emphasis every time the rich fool uses the words “I”, “me”, “my,” or “myself.” Okay? Follow along on the screen, and as you read aloud, emphasize the words in bold:

He said to himself, ‘What should **I** do? **I** don’t have room for all **my** crops.’ Then he said, ‘**I** know! **I’ll** tear down **my** barns and build bigger ones. Then **I’ll** have room enough to store all **my** wheat and other goods. And **I’ll** sit back and say to **myself**, “**My** friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!”⁴

If you didn’t catch how many times the rich fool used some form of the personal pronoun, it was 11 times in just two verses. And when he finally tells himself to take life easy—to eat, drink and be merry— he’s betraying the fact that the only person he’s really thinking of— the only person he feels any sense of responsibility toward— is himself.

In telling this story, Jesus is teaching us that the heartbeat of greed is selfishness.

You see, greed isn’t just about having more; it’s about what I call “mine.” The great theologian Thomas Aquinas said the greedy person takes pleasure in considering himself or herself to be the possessor of riches. The rich fool clutched tightly to all the money and stuff in his possession, calling it, “Mine!”

But **just because something is IN your possession does not mean it IS your possession.** The clear teaching of the Bible is that in the final analysis, we really own nothing. As Job says in the Old Testament, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and

³ Luke 17:33 (NLT)

⁴ Luke 12:17-19 (NLT)

naked I will depart.”⁵ Only our Creator rightfully claims ownership of all things. As God declares in Psalm 50:

For all the animals of the forest are mine,
and I own the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know every bird on the mountains,
and all the animals of the field are mine.
... for all the world is mine and everything in it.⁶

According to the Bible, you and I are not the true owners of our money and our stuff. God is.

What does that make us, then? It makes us *stewards*, or *trustees*. God has entrusted his resources to us so that our basic needs can be met, and also so that we can enjoy, with thanksgiving, certain pleasures of life— because God isn’t a killjoy who calls us to bare bones minimalism.

The Bible leaves ample room for celebration and feasting and taking delight in beauty and art and craftsmanship and every good and perfect gift that God so kindly provides. But our primary calling as stewards of God’s resources is to invest those resources for the sake of God’s mission to restore this world in and through Jesus.

And that means it’s our responsibility to use the resources God entrusts to us to bless and serve others in Jesus’ name. Scripture is very clear that one day we will stand before God and account for the way we stewarded not *our* resources, but *his* resources, which he has loaned to us for a time.

New Testament scholar Darrel Bock comments on our passage in Luke 12, saying, “Our relative wealth opens up choices for us to pursue self-interest in a variety of ways,” much like it did for the rich man in Jesus’ story.

Maybe you’re aware that the New Testament says more about money than almost any other subject. Five times more is said about money than prayer or faith, for example. So obviously, the way we view and handle our money is of enormous importance to God if the topic was given that much space in scripture.

Most of us in this room are far wealthier than the vast majority of people, past and present, who have ever inhabited this planet. And given our relative wealth, we need to be doubly careful that we don’t get caught up in the pursuit of self-interest.

So let’s pray our second prayer to combat greed once more: *Lord, help me see beyond self!*

⁵ See Job 1:21

⁶ Psalm 50:10-11, 12b (NLT)

Because in God's eyes, the person who cannot see beyond self is what? *A fool*. That's what God calls the rich man in the parable: "You fool!" In the Bible, a fool isn't a goofy person or a clown or a court jester. Instead, a fool is a person who lives without reference to God and God's priorities. The fool doesn't factor God into his or her day-to-day living in any meaningful or significant way—in a way that actually costs something. That's because the fool's life is too filled up with greedy self-love for there to be room to love God and neighbour. As Jesus says in verse 21:

"Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God."⁷

Only when we have a rich relationship with the eternal God will we learn to live for what lasts. And that brings us to our third prayer to combat greed. Let's pray this aloud together:

3. Lord, help me live for what lasts!

Like any of the Seven Deadly Sins, greed is a pretty heavy topic, so it might be nice to have a quick break for some comic relief. Now, I'm not a fan of country music. Sorry if that disappoints some of you.

But the fact that I'm not a fan of that particular musical genre doesn't mean that I can't appreciate just how memorable and poignant some country lyrics can be. Here's just a small sampling of some brilliant country song titles—and these are real songs, I kid you not. I did not make these up!

- *There's a tear in my beer.*
- *Walk out on me backwards, so it looks like you're coming in.*
- *If the phone don't ring, you'll know it's me.*
- *How can I miss you if you won't go away?*
- *I'm so miserable without you, it's almost like having you here.*
- *If my nose was runnin' money, I'd blow it all on you.*

Thus ends our little comic relief break. But to segue back to our main topic, I once heard a country song with these hard-to-forget lyrics:

Ain't no hearse with a trailer hitch.

Now I'm not going to assume that everyone will automatically understand that statement.

I think most of you know what a hearse is, right? It's one of those long black vehicles you'll find at a funeral home designed to transport deceased persons in their caskets to the cemetery.

⁷ Luke 12:21 (NLT)

This country song lyric is suggesting that you will never find a hearse with a trailer hitch on the back of it—a hitch you could attach a trailer to in order to haul your possessions.

In other words, you can't take your money and your stuff with you when you die.

We've seen how the rich fool referred to the possessions he had accumulated—his fine crops, his wheat and other goods, and the bigger barns he built to hold it all. He referred to them as, "Mine." But as it turned out, he just got to use them temporarily.

Just when he thought he had made it, just when he thought he could take it easy and enjoy the good life, what happened? Lights out. All those years of effort to attain material abundance—a certain standard of living, and bang—it was over, just like that.

In verse 20 of our passage, God said to him:

"You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?"⁸

Of course, the point really isn't about who would actually get the rich man's possessions. Rather, the point was about who would *not* be getting them—the rich man himself. Because *ain't no hearse with a trailer hitch*.

The reason we tend to pursue money and stuff to the degree that we do is because on some level, we have failed to appreciate what really has lasting value; value beyond this life.

Jesus wants you to ask yourself, "What is it that really matters? What is it that's actually worth giving my one and only life to?"

John Ortberg tells a humorous and powerful story about a profound life lesson he learned from his grandmother. Let me read it to you:

[My grandmother] taught me how to play the game of Monopoly. She understood that the name of the game was to acquire. She would accumulate everything she could, and eventually she became the master of the board.

Every time [we'd play] she would take my last dollar, and I would quit in utter defeat. And she would always say the same thing to me. She'd look at me and say, "One day, you'll learn to play the game."

One summer, I played Monopoly with a neighbour every day. We would play for hours. And that summer, I learned to play the game. I came to understand that the only way to win was to make a total commitment to acquisition. I came to understand that money and possessions—that's the way you keep score. And by the end of that summer, I was more ruthless than my grandmother. I was ready to bend the rules, if I had to, to win that game.

⁸ Luke 12:20 (NLT)

When I sat down to play with [my grandmother] that fall, *I took everything she had*. I destroyed her financially and psychologically. This time *she* was stripped of *her* last dollar, left to quit in utter defeat.

But then she had one more thing to teach me. She said, "Now it all goes back in the box." All those houses and hotels. All the railroads and utility companies. All that property, and all that wonderful money. "Now it all goes back in the box."⁴

"I didn't want it to go back in the box!" explains Ortberg.

"No" [replied his grandmother]. "None of it was really yours... It was around a long time a long time before you sat down at the board. And it will be here after you're gone."

Players come and players go. But *it all goes back in the box*. Houses and cars. Titles and clothes. Filled barns, bulging portfolios.

The fact is that everything I consume and hoard is going to go back in the box, and I'm going to lose it all. There's not much of an R.O.I. on that.

So you have to ask yourself, when you finally get the ultimate promotion, when you finally make the ultimate purchase, when you buy the ultimate home, when you have stored up financial security and climbed the ladder of success to the highest rung you can, and the thrill wears off—and it will wear off—then what?

How far do you have to walk down that road before you see where it leads? Surely you understand, it'll never be enough. And so [concludes Ortberg] you have to ask yourself the question: *What matters?*

I think it would be great if we could actually implement his suggestion. We should get a bunch of tags, some red, and some green. The color red means "warning," and anything of temporary value should get a red tag. House, car, job, bank account, investment portfolio, electronics, clothes, sports equipment, hobby collections, and so forth. Of course, there is nothing wrong with these things in and of themselves, but are we squandering an inordinate amount of our best thought, time, money and energy on what is temporary—on what will one day go back in the box?

Instead we need to invest in green-tag items. And of course green is the color that signifies... *life*. We need to invest in things that last; in things that have eternal value. If I were green-tagging my own life, first I'd put a green tag on my relationship with God. After all, God is the one, Jesus says, whose kingdom we are supposed to seek now and then when we get the chance... No! God is the one whose kingdom we are supposed to seek first. There should be nothing more important to me than my relationship with God, so I'm going to want to reserve some of the best hours of my days cultivating my relationship with

God, paying attention to God, praying to God, studying God's word, learning to walk in God's ways. As Jesus said at the end of our passage:

"Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God."⁹

I'd then put green tags on Jan, Nicole, Matthew and Ryan—my family. I'd make sure many of my best hours are available to them. I talk with my 96 year-old dad on the phone nearly every day for maybe a half hour. So he gets a green tag, for sure. I'd put a green tag on Cornerstone, the congregation God has called me to serve. I believe what the Bible teaches—that God's plan to redeem this world through Christ finds its focal point in local churches just like this one.

I'd put a green tag on the time I spend preparing sermons and the time I spend partnering with fellow staff members and the people of this congregation, as I engage in various types of ministry in line with my God-given gifts, strengths, and callings. Why? That service, by God's grace, will not merely have temporary value, but eternal value, because it's invested in people like yourselves, and people like our neighbours in the greater community.

And if I take God's word seriously, I must also be investing the care of the poor and needy.

If God thought people were worth his Son dying for, then there can be no question that every human being has eternal value in God's eyes. So how am I doing when it comes to loving my neighbour?

Ideally, I'd like to make sure that all my red tag items were working in the service of my green tag items. Take money, for example. Does the way I give show that I am truly invested in God's kingdom mission in this world?

We're in this building only because so many of you financially invested, sacrificially so, in the work of God's kingdom, and God has blessed our greater community as a result.

Of course, I would need to ask myself, "Am I providing for the basic needs of my family, and saving wisely in preparation for future needs?"

How about my house? Is it a place that is open to guests, a place where hospitality and friendship and community are extended to others? Is it a place where the relationships are forged and the gospel shared?

I'm certainly not saying that I have arrived in these areas. The point is, that red-tagging and green-tagging things in our minds helps us to see beyond a merely temporary perspective. It's like Jesus says in Matthew chapter 6:

⁹ Luke 12:21 (NLT)

“Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.”¹⁰

Where is your treasure? Where is your heart? With the earthly or the heavenly? With the temporary or with the eternal?

The reason it can be so hard for us to combat greed—the reason it’s so hard for us to embrace a life where we’re content to give away more and live with less—is because we trust our money and stuff to give us a future and a life more than we trust God to give us a future and a life. Do I trust wealth to be my saviour, or do I trust Jesus to be my Saviour? Is my treasure my god, or is God my treasure?

It all comes down to what captures my heart.

We’ve defined greed as an excessive love or desire for money or any possession money can buy. Greed has you in its clutches when you’ve set your heart on money or anything money can buy to give you a sense of significance and security. And when something truly has your heart, there is very little you won’t do to maintain it, sustain it or reclaim it. When earthly treasure has captured your heart, it will eventually insist that you die for it. In the end, the rich fool died for his wealth—greed cost him his very life.

But consider this. Jesus Christ came and died for you, for me, and for the world. Why would he do that? Because we are his heart’s treasure. There was nothing he wouldn’t do to reclaim us, lost as we were in our sin and rebellion against God. So every other treasure in the world will insist that you die for it— but Jesus dies for you—because you are his heart’s treasure.

Tim Keller drives the point home when he suggests that if you lack the freedom to live with less money and stuff, and to give more of it away, it’s because something besides Jesus Christ is your functional Lord and Saviour.

In 2 Corinthians, the Bible says:

You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.¹¹

How do you get free from greed? How do you set yourself up to grow—really grow— in generosity? What you do is you think deeply about the radical generosity of Jesus Christ—who left the riches of heaven, came to earth as a human being, and died a tortuous

¹⁰ Matthew 6:19-21 (NLT)

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 8:9 (NLT)

criminal's death on the cross, because he so treasures us that those are the lengths he would go to in order to reclaim us.

The more you can envision Jesus dying because you're the treasure of his heart, the more Jesus will become the treasure of your own heart. As Jesus becomes the treasure of your heart, you'll know that he can be trusted—absolutely— with your life and your future.

You'll no longer feel compelled to entrust your future to your labours and your fortunes, but to the God who will never, ever fail to give you this day your daily bread. As the Bible says, "Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?"¹²

I'd like to conclude this message by highlighting one practical step you can take in response to today's message.

I'd like to direct your attention to the tall card in the seat pouch that says "Give" at the top. Alternatively, you can check out the "Give" page on our website:

www.cornerstonechurch.ca/give.

There you will find information on the various ways you can give back to God by supporting the mission and ministries of this church. And such giving isn't just about supporting the church—although that's an important piece of the puzzle. When you practice giving—and particularly giving in response to Jesus' radical generosity toward you—then your heart will become freer and freer from greed.

"How much should I give?" you may be wondering. Renowned theologian and preacher Will Willimon says, "I have found, over the years, that giving away at least ten percent of my income is a way of reclaiming part of what I have as a gift from God, as undeserved, unearned grace. True, ten percent is only a small part of what I have, yet one has to begin somewhere. For me and my house, that ten percent is a sign of freedom."

I can totally relate to what Willimon says. Christians, including Jan and me, have practiced tithing down through the centuries. Tithing is giving of 10% of your gross income to God's work. The tithe is a benchmark you can meet, exceed, or work toward, depending on your situation and how God is leading you.

To be clear, we don't practice tithing to earn God's love. Rather, we practice tithing to learn how to live in the love and freedom God has for us.

While some Christians have differing viewpoints about the practice of a ten percent tithe, at the end of the day, the measure of Christian generosity is not a number. It's not a percentage. Rather, the measure of our generosity is Jesus Christ himself. As his disciples, as his followers, he is the pattern, he is the model, for our generosity—for the giving away

¹² See Romans 8:32

of our time, talent, and treasure. So please use the Give card or webpage as a reference point if that's helpful information for you when it comes to taking next steps with the practice of tithing or giving. But know that as Christians, we should sit down not with a calculator when getting ready to give— but with a cross.

Let's close by praying aloud together the three prayers to combat greed:

Lord, help me stand guard against greed!

Lord, help me see beyond self!

Lord, help me live for what lasts!