

Greed

SCOTT HOEZEE

Every once in a while, when children play together, one child will suddenly start gathering up as many toys as he can. The child will put all the toys in a pile and then stand over them to keep the other kids away. Of course, the kid will be so busy guarding his stash that he will not actually have time to play with the toys, but that is okay. It is not about enjoying the toys, but just having them. Sometimes we adults are not so very different. We think a lot about what we have, but also how much of it we have. Today on Groundwork, let's think about the deadly sin of greed, and what this love of possessing does to us spiritually and how the Holy Spirit can help reorient us to a better perspective.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are a little over half-way through our series on the seven deadly sins, and that brings us to what is often the fifth sin on the traditional list, and that is greed, or sometimes it is called avarice.

DAVE BAST

Avaricia in Latin. Greed is another one of these things that I think takes a little nuance. Probably most of us have a clear handle on what constitutes greed, but on the other hand, there is a legitimate or lawful ambition, we might call it, to want to be successful, to want to do well, and in our culture that is often measured by money. Is it wrong, really, to want that? Is it wrong to try to earn as much as you can?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, too, if you look in scripture, actually, a great deal of the laws in the Old Testament – and you see them into the New Testament – are about protecting people's property, respecting your neighbor's property so that they will respect yours. So, the idea of having, of possessing, there is nothing wrong with that. God has given us good gifts in His creation. He wants us to enjoy them. He wants us to flourish for them. So, when we talk about greed, and particularly greed as a deadly sin, it is not just having something, it is something wrong about our attitude toward the having.

DAVE BAST

You mentioned the Old Testament. You could even think about the Patriarchs and how, with Abraham for example, it is almost lovingly the way the writer of Genesis describes all of his herds and his flocks and his great wealth, and this is held up as a sign that God has blessed Abraham. We do not want to necessarily knock the having. I guess you could say it is a question of whether you have your possessions or your possessions have you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. The other thing that we sometimes think when it comes to greed is that we are only talking about really wealthy people – people who have a lot of stuff. They must be the greedy ones. But not really; in the tradition of this sin, we know that it is completely possible to be a greedy person even if you do not have that

much; because again, it is not how much you have, but what is your attitude toward it. There are some very wealthy people who actually are not greedy at all and there a number of people who do not have that much in the bank, but boy-oh-boy, they are hung up on the love of possessing – of what they have.

DAVE BAST

Maybe it would be helpful if we would identify perhaps a few of the characteristics of sinful greed; and one of them, certainly, is a kind of restlessness. You never have enough. You are never satisfied. As soon as you get one thing, you start to think about the next and the next and the next.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, Dave, the Puritans had that great saying: Enough is as good as a feast. But in greed, the word *enough* does not come up. You never have enough because somehow you are taking security in the heaping up of possessions. Sometimes you see it in our society today. Sometimes kids head off to the mall, or one of your friends goes to the mall to go shopping, and you say, “What are you shopping for?” “I don’t know; I’m just shopping. I just need something. I don’t know, but I will know it, maybe, when I see it.” So, we are shopping for shopping’s sake, because somehow we think if we just keep getting more stuff eventually we will find the magic item or we will get enough that we will feel good. So, that restlessness and that always, always, always wanting more, whatever it is, it does not matter if you collect cars or toy cars or model airplanes, money; it is just that you need more.

DAVE BAST

I think there is another aspect of it that is helpful, and that is to ask the question: What won’t you do for money; because sinful greed knows no bounds.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It takes over.

DAVE BAST

When it is all a question of getting, that usually means taking from others, and I think there are some classic stories in the Bible; there are classic illustrations from ancient history as well, ad monetary; I don’t mean monetary in the sense of money, I mean warning; that kind of admonition. So, you think of a story like Ahab and Naboth, if you remember that from the Old Testament. Here is Ahab; he is the king; he has everything, but he sees one little, lonely vineyard that is not his, and what does he do? He is willing to murder in order to get that; or allowed his wife to...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Anything to get more.

DAVE BAST

Yes. So, ask yourself this: Are there things I will not do? Because if you do not have a good answer to that, then watch out.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is why right near the center of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapter 6, Jesus has this to say – so much of the Sermon on the Mount is positive and upbeat and blessings – but right in the middle of Matthew 6 Jesus says,

²¹“For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be. ²⁴No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” So, there is an either/or scenario where Jesus is setting it up as a very high-stakes game of spirituality. Who is your God? What is the driving center of your life?

DAVE BAST

There can only be one number one in any of our lives or in any of our hearts. Actually, in the original, as you know, Scott, He said, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” That old word which really was a kind of personification of the god – the idol – of money – of possessions. So, there Jesus puts it to us squarely, “Which one is it?” And how you answer that is going to be determined more by your actions than by your words.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When greed, when money, mammon, when possessions and the love of possessing takes over your life, it becomes the lens by which you see everything. It is sort of the old story of King Midas. He was given the golden touch so that everything that he touched would turn to gold; and then, of course, one day his daughter comes in and he touches her, and so the tragedy of King Midas is – you could say on one hand, “Well, all he had was gold,” but on the other hand, all he had was gold; and in the end, it took over his life.

Forbes always publishes its list of wealthiest people and they will say, “This person is worth three billion dollars.” So, the whole person now is a dollar sign.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I always want to say, “No, excuse me. That person is worth an infinite value in the eyes of God, as a creature of God. Our worth is not determined by our bottom line, our so-called net worth. It is our worth as God has created us in His eyes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But with greed, we lose sight of that; and that does not even matter. We do not care how much we are valued by God. We want to know how much we have. Again, you think of characters like Scrooge in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*; all he loved was money. He did not know his co-worker, Bob Cratchit, he did not know Bob Cratchit had a little child with a disability. He had no idea because he did not care about people, only money; only the bottom line; only profit. When that is your god, if you are serving mammon, then that is how you view everybody else around you in life. Everything becomes a thing.

DAVE BAST

Let’s look at a Bible story that sums this up and shows us Jesus’ perspective on the question of greed, and we will do that in just a moment.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, and today we are talking about the sin of greed or avarice. We are in the midst of a series on the seven deadly sins, and these are attitudes, primarily, that the early Church identified as being especially dangerous to us spiritually. So, we have been trying to tease out the idea or the notion of what constitutes greed. And really, it is not just the love of possessions, Scott; we have been saying it is the love of possessing, and always wanting more.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you define yourself and you define other people, not by how wonderful they are and not by the fact that you see them as a sister or brother created in the image of God; you define yourself and you define other people by what they own. I was thinking that a while back *Newsweek Magazine* had an article about this competitive kitchen thing, where a lot of younger couples were competing to see who could have the most well-stocked pantry, and so they had this one young couple and they went through their kitchen and they said, “They’ve got five kinds of vinegar, a big tin of Hungarian paprika, masa flour from Mexico, ground sesame seeds, Pomi brand strained tomatoes, wild rice from Minnesota, Tiffany bloody Mary mugs, a tortilla press, hot pepper sauce from Barbados, five kinds of mustard, 180 bottles in their wine collection, and this couple was totally proud of this. This defined who they were. This was their status in life and then they admitted, “We don’t like to cook. We usually eat out.”

DAVE BAST

I am sure they had the stainless steel appliances and granite countertops, too, that are absolutely necessary in today's modern kitchen. Actually, spiritually greed leads to a form of idolatry, in which we worship our possessions rather than the God who created us and who gave us the ability to have what we have.

The key story, I think, in the Gospels that points this out is the story we know as the rich young ruler. It is familiar perhaps to many of us, but let me just read it from Mark 10:

¹⁷As Jesus started on His way, a man ran up to Him and fell on his knees before Him. "Good Teacher," he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸"Why do you call Me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good except God alone."

There is a statement that has caused pause for a number of people; is Jesus rejecting the notion that He is good? Not necessarily, I think He is just trying to get this guy's attention. He strikes me, this young man, as being quite complacent, quite proud, quite full of himself.

So, Jesus says, ¹⁹"You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, steal, etc, etc. How about it?" ²⁰And the young man replies, "Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy." And here is comes, ²¹Jesus looked at him and loved him, "One thing you lack," he said, "Go sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow Me." ²²At this, the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth. ²³Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here is a story that, I think, is often misunderstood. We think that the only problem he had is that he loved his possessions too much, and so forth; or that there was just something about being wealthy that automatically means you can never... unless you sell it all. But, that is not really the core problem that Jesus is trying to get at. Jesus knows nobody can save themselves, so if this young man had gone and sold everything he had and come back to Jesus and said, "Okay, I checked off the last box, now have I succeeded in saving myself? Do I get to go to heaven now, because I did that?" Nobody gets to heaven for what they do. It is only by grace; and so what Jesus is getting at with this man is, his can-do attitude. That is one of the things when you love possessions and when you spend your life collecting things, you figure there is nothing you cannot collect; nothing you cannot snag on your own, including for this man, salvation itself: I should be able to do this. I can collect it just like I have collected money and collected cars or collected Armani suits. Now I can collect salvation, and that is the attitude that gets in the way. You cannot do that.

DAVE BAST

Really, I think the first shock comes when Jesus says, "You know what? You still lack something." He pretty much assumed he had...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He had it all...

DAVE BAST

He had completed the test. He had successfully aced the exam. "I kept all these things since I was a child." I think Jesus wants to help him open his eyes to the fact that he really was not righteous in his standing with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

0:13:53.5] [He needed grace, the same as everybody, and the disciples, if we read further in this, the disciples will eventually say, "Well, who could be saved? But hey, we have given up everything for you," and Jesus says, "Yeah, that is good, but remember, ³¹the first will be last and the last first." It is all grace, and you have to accept that.

What greed does in our lives is just makes us think that we can get, we can collect, we can possess, on our own, everything we need. We are independent. So, there is a lack of trust in God to give us what we need and to provide for us as we need. That probably was this man's problem, too; he was just too self-reliant to ever

rely on God alone.

DAVE BAST

I think that is a very significant point when you mentioned lack of trust because one of the strongest things that drives us to greed, to always try to get a little bit more, is the fact that we are doubtful, really, of the fact that God will see us through. God will provide for our needs. God will protect us. God will keep us. His grace is sufficient, as Paul learned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is one of the things greed does. One of the things that truly greedy people who collect incredible amounts, just like this couple with the kitchen stuff, one of the things that greed does is, they cannot use everything they have, but it gives them options. Imelda Marcos, from the President of the Philippines years ago, they found that she had 2,000 pairs of shoes in her closet. She could never wear that many shoes, so what good is it having...? Well, she had options. She would never not be able to find the perfect pair of shoes to go with whatever outfit. So, you are relying on yourself again. You have options. You do not need anybody else's help. In the Christian realm, and for this rich young man in Mark 10, he had options his whole life long. He did not need God to help him; he would do it himself. Here Jesus pricks that balloon and says, "Sorry, you do need God. Only God can get a camel through the eye of a needle. You cannot do it yourself, but God can."

DAVE BAST

I want to talk a little bit about how we can deal with this problem. What steps can we take if we are aware of it, if we are alerted to the fact? Especially considering the culture that we live in, which is continually hammering away at us. Look at advertising: You need this. You need this. You need this. How do you respond to that? What are some practical things you can do to combat the power of greed or the forces that want to say, "Do you have enough?" Right now, if you are of a certain age, Scott, as I am, all you can hear are these things aimed at us baby-boomers: You are about to retire. Are you going to have enough? Do you need a little more? Have you done the planning? Have you worked the numbers? How do we as Christians respond to that in a way that is more faithful, that says, "No, I want to follow Jesus. I want to put my trust in God. I want Him on the throne of my heart. I do not want to serve mammon. I do not want to be a greedy person." What are some practical things?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we as Christians want to serve God as our only true master. We want to celebrate salvation as the gift of grace that it is, not our own accomplishment. So, how can we do that? What are some spiritual practices that can help us? We will think about that when we come back.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we are looking at the deadly sin of greed. We said just a moment ago, Dave, you were noting the way advertisers try to scare us and target us; especially baby-boomers, who are now approaching retirement. Have you done enough? Have you collected enough? Advertisers are always doing that. We are always being told: You need more. The secret to life is more. Get more. Someday you will get enough; but actually, they hope you never get enough because then you will stop buying, and so, advertisers keep us unsatisfied.

DAVE BAST

Either more or new.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are always getting that. We have seen in recent years the terrible extremes that people will go to to get money. People who will put body parts or pieces of glass in their Burger King food or their Wendy's chili so

they can sue Wendy's, sue Burger King, and then if they get the money, now they think their lives will be good. Those are the extremes that greed can drive us to.

DAVE BAST

There is the whole issue of gambling – you want to talk about a societal problem – it is the whole allure of getting something for nothing; getting rich quick without having work for it, and then your fantasies will come true; you will be able to indulge your every desire and whim and appetite; and it is a lie.

One practical thing that we can do – we talk about some practical steps to combat greed – is recognize the lie when you see it, in advertising or elsewhere, and even laugh at it. Laugh out loud.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, laugh out loud; let your kids hear you.

In Isaiah 58, the Lord is, through Isaiah, speaking to Israel and saying, “What do I want you to do and where is the true secret of life?” Listen to these verses. Isaiah 58, starting at verse 7:

⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter? When you see the naked, to clothe them and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood. ⁸Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear. Then your righteousness will go before you and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. ⁹Then you will call and the Lord will answer. You will cry for help and He will say, “Here I am.” If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing and malicious talk, ¹⁰and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

The secret to life, God says here, and Jesus says again and again in the New Testament, is giving away. Generosity.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; beautiful. There is one surefire cure to the sin of greed, and if you are worried about it, if you think you might be suffering or struggling, then the one thing you can do that will work every time is to give your money away. A great biblical example, again – we have been looking at these wonderful passages – but, probably the epitome of this Isaiah passage in the New Testament is little Zacchaeus. Remember the wee little man. He was a tax collector and tax collector was absolutely synonymous with greed in the days of the Gospel. That is why they took that job; that is why they were so despised; because they were rapacious and they used the power that Rome gave them to squeeze people like a turnip and throw them away. When Zacchaeus met Jesus you remember his response.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure, yes. “I am going to repay everybody I have stolen from. I am going to make it good. I am going to give them back... I will just start giving away,” and Jesus said, “Ah, salvation, he gets it.” You see that sometimes in your own kids. We had it just this year at Christmas; where my daughter, who is 21 now, said at one point, “I used to love Christmas because I couldn't wait to get presents. Now I can't wait to see people open what I got them.” That is a mark of maturity that hopefully we will all get to someday, to realize that the secret is giving away. What did God the Son come to this planet to do but to give everything He had for us? “He emptied Himself,” Paul says, in Philippians Chapter 2, “and this is what you should be like,” Paul says. You give away; you are generous, you volunteer at the soup kitchen, you look into the eyes of people who have less and give to them. That is one way to start curing yourself of thinking that the goal of life is: The one who dies with the most toys wins. No; the one who has given away the most toys is the one who understands the kingdom of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, as Paul says in II Corinthians 8: ⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor so that you might become rich indeed. He says this in the context of a passage where he is talking about giving: giving to the church, giving to the poor, giving to those in need; and we have before us the infinite example, really, of Jesus, who gave everything, who impoverished Himself. Think of His surrendering – that Philippians passage that you just quoted – the first thing that He

did was He let go of the glory and the position that was His as God and voluntarily took upon Himself the form of a slave; so He impoverished Himself in that way so that we could, in turn, become rich.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And took joy in that as well; for the joy that was set before Him, Jesus did all of that. The writer Frederick Buechner once observed, Dave, and you have probably read this, too. He said, “Greed operates on a simple mathematical formula: The more you get, the more you have.” True enough. The Gospel does not operate on math, it operates on grace, and the Gospel knows that if greed is the more you get, the more you have, the Gospel is the more you give away and love, the more you are. Since no one ever lived that truth out more powerfully than Jesus Himself, we can be pretty sure that Jesus knew what He was talking about and set the example for all of us; that it is in the giving away that true life is found, both for us and for those to whom we give life.

DAVE BAST

Not only true life but real and lasting joy. I think that is again what Isaiah is trying to tell us: If you will do this, if you will just turn outward and spend yourself and spend what you have for the needs of others, God will shine upon you. Nobody is less happy than the miser; nobody is lonelier than the greedy accumulator; and nobody is happier than those who have learned the secret of giving.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com, tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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