

*The Seven Deadly Sins 1: Greed*

Luke 12:16-21; 1 Timothy 6:6-10

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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Friends, I'm here today to talk about SIN!!! So brace yourself for some good ol' fire and brimstone!

Ah, who am I kidding? That's just not my style. But I am here to talk about sin. It wasn't my idea, though. A couple of years ago when I did that sermon survey, someone suggested I preach on the Seven Deadly Sins. SO you see, I do listen to y'all! It just takes a while to see results sometimes.

Sin isn't something we mainline Protestants talk about too much. We leave the fire and brimstone to our more fundamentalist brothers and sisters. If we talk about sin at all, we talk more about social sins like poverty, injustice, and so forth, or we try to see the brighter side of sin, as in a series of columns our "UC News" ran last year looking at the virtues of the seven deadly sins. And why not? One of the slippery things about the seven "deadlies" is that they're all rooted in something good, or at least value-neutral. Gluttony: the pleasure of a good meal. Lust: the pleasure of good sex. Sloth: the pleasure of a good nap. Each one can even be seen as a virtue: pride in one's achievements, anger at injustice.

One contemporary writer, Dan Savage, went so far as to write a book documenting his attempt to indulge in every single one of the deadly sins, from gambling in Vegas to marching in the Gay Pride parade. His thesis is that talk of sin really amounts to condemning other people's pleasure, and this kind of self-righteous judgment has no place in a United States whose constitution protects our God-given right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

He makes an interesting point, and certainly we do need to be wary of any eagerness to condemn other people's foibles or happiness, but I think he has too shallow a view of sin. I think there's something worth learning from the seven deadly sins, and looking at them head on, not from the side in terms of social sins – because all societies are made up of individuals – and not from the back-side in terms of their virtues. We mainline Protestants tend to be weak on sin, and that leaves us poorly equipped to deal with the ordinary, personal, moral issues that we all face day to day. Indeed, a study of the seven deadlies can help us in the matter of Christian discipleship. As Christians, we are all called to imitate Christ, to grow in our practice and ability as Christians. And it's from that perspective that we will look at the big seven.

Now as I said, the seven can sometimes have value. Any business owner needs a good dose of greed, and a lot of their business is based on customers' envy. For that matter, anyone who decides to run for president has to have an inordinate amount of pride. So these sins may be virtues in other contexts. And all of us, in addition to be Christians, are also business owners, teachers, lawyers, janitors. Sure, we ought to strive to be Christ-like in all aspects of our lives, but that's a lot easier said than done. Anyway, my purpose here is not to look at how to be a more Christian businessperson, but to look at how to be a better Christian.

So the first sin on our menu is greed, an ambiguous sin in our culture, for sure! Surely all of us own interest-earning accounts. We've saved for retirement and our kids' college education. We may have even gone gambling or bought a lottery ticket! Some greed is more obviously wrong than others, but where do we draw the line? As I researched this topic, I found a very thought-provoking definition of greed as "a life subject to human control over a life of vulnerable trust in the unseen." Let me say that again. The book I read that in made the point that greed often masquerades as thrift, the

ability to save and economize here and there, all in the interest of making our dollar go farther, of saving up to provide for our families. Not that that's a bad thing! But think about it in terms of the parables we've heard today. A rich man makes good. His crops are plentiful, so much so that he doesn't have enough room to store it all. So he tears down his old barns to build new ones and tells himself that now he can relax and enjoy himself. What in the world is wrong with that? Nothing, really. Except that he dies that very night and never gets to enjoy his prosperity. Well, then's the breaks, we might say. Tough luck, but it happens – and still, is what he did so very wrong? No. Except, as Jesus says in the punch line, he laid up treasures for himself but was stingy toward God. Or as my earlier quote said, he chose a life subject to human control over a life of vulnerable trust in the unseen.

According to this parable, then, what is deadly about greed? It is the myth of self-reliance, of independence. It is the error that we can provide fully for ourselves, that we do not need the providence of God. The man in the parable thought he was self-sufficient. He had everything planned out. The one thing he didn't plan for was his sudden death.

Consider then the example Jesus sets for us in contrast. He was not greedy. He did not depend on self-reliance over and against trust in God's providence. In fact, consider the agony in the garden, before his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus went aside to pray to God for aid and succor. And him, the son of God! The Messiah! Even Jesus had to depend on God to provide. And in his hour of need, it wasn't only God he turned to. He sought as well help from his friends, from Peter, James, and John. He took them with him, so he could have their prayers and companionship. Alas, they fell asleep. Still, the fact that they failed him does not negate his need for them in the first place.

Indeed, we see that Jesus always relied on the generosity of others as well as God. He had no money or job. Instead, he would be invited to stay in people's houses. They would bring him food and provide for him. I'm not trying to say that he was a freeloader! Jesus was content to sleep outdoors if no one provided a roof for the night. Whatever he had was enough because it came from God. But it sometimes came from other people, and that was enough too, whether it was the hospitality of a rich man like Nicodemus who could spread a banquet for him, or whether it was a little boy who had nothing but five loaves of bread and three fish. Whether it was perfume worth 10,000 denarii's, or a poor widow's copper coin – whatever people gave, it was enough, plenty, a bounty. Jesus gave to others without expecting anything in return. And when they did give to him, he graciously accepted the gift.

He was not independent, not self-reliant, if that means he was cut off or isolated from others. He was interconnected with the people around him in a free exchange of gifts and generosity. He never sought to hinder that flow through greed or hoarding.

So with Jesus as our example, the question for each of us then is how in our Christian life we let greed damage and deter us, and how do we let liberality and generosity spur us to grow? Do we fool ourselves that we can be spiritually self-sufficient, and cut ourselves off from other people of faith? Or do we approach others with an open spirit where we may bless one another? And for that matter, when it comes to our resources, including our money, which spirit do we let guide and govern us? A spirit of generosity or a spirit of greed?

Again, there may be other contexts where greed, or at any rate thrift, can be a virtue. But when it comes to our lives as Christians, we would do well to remember the words in First Timothy: we brought nothing into the world, and we take nothing out of it. If we have food and clothing, let us be content, for people who want to be rich fall into temptation and a trap that plunges them into ruin and destruction. The love of money is a root for all kinds of evil, so let us put our hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.