

Lent Series '17
Second Sunday of Lent
March 12, 2017
Seven Deadly Sins: Avarice
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Avarice, one of the seven deadly sins, also known as greed, is defined by Webster's as "An excessive desire to have wealth."

Since wealth itself could be defined as an "excess", having more than one need, avarice would be an excessive desire to possess an excess. That's pretty excessive!

When we think of greed we might think of Mr. Burns, the owner of the nuclear power plant in Springfield, USA, where Homer Simpson, of all people, is the safety director. Burns worships the Almighty Dollar, caring more about profits than about the safety of his workers or the surrounding community. His house is guarded by high fences and vicious dogs. He pinches every penny and share with no one. When he is lonely he goes into his vault and runs his fingers lovingly through his gold.

Mr. Burns is oblivious to the warnings in Scripture, such as Psalm 39:

"Man is a phantom, like vapor his restless pursuits; he heaps up stores and know not who will use them."

Or this from the Book of Proverbs: "He who is greedy of gain brings ruin on his own house." (15:27)

Or this from Jesus, recorded by Luke: "Avoid greed in all its forms. A man may have wealth, but one's life does not consist of possessions." (12:15)

Few real life people are as bad as the fictional Mr. Burns, or Scrooge from Dickens' "A Christmas Carol", but these exaggerated characters illustrate the point. The greedy person thinks that life does consist of possessions, which dehumanizes them in their own eyes and everyone around them. They think the purpose of life is to acquire and control, and they become so focused on this that they miss the true purpose of life, which is to know, love and serve God in this world, and be happy with Him forever in the next. They serve not God but mammon. They worship not the Creator but created things. Because they think life consists of possessions and that the purpose of life is acquisition, they regard other people as means to this end. They lie to them, steal from them, endanger their safety, ignores them in their need.

The greedy one isolates himself in a cynical cocoon of calculation, and the cynicism affects even his closest relationships. If you will lie to your boss or steal from your employees to get ahead, you probably don't know how to treat your spouse, your children, or your friends

with love and respect either. You become a stranger even to yourself, forgetting who you are and why you are here. And so the greedy one winds up in a cold and lonely place, far from God, who is love and the source of life. This is why greed is one of the seven deadly sins.

Greed, like all vices, is a disorder of a virtue. It is good to be hard-working and financially self-reliant. If we are good stewards of created things, as we should be, we will have some money in the bank. If everyone slacked off and relied on the charity of others no one would have enough to give charity. Even great wealth cannot be condemned if it is not ill-gotten, the owner is not attached to it, and uses it to create opportunity for others and provide relief for the poor.

It is the excessive desire for wealth more than the wealth itself that makes for greed and the desire is excessive if it disorders our priorities and our relationships, with God and other people.

Your spouse and your kids would rather have your time and attention than the things you buy them with that extra income. If they prefer the things, they too have been infected with greed.

Few people are as bad as Scrooge or Burns, but we are all a little like them, because a vice is a disorder of a virtue, and who is perfectly virtuous? The virtue of thrift and hard work can get disordered little by little. How to tell if we are getting greedy? If we are humble enough to listen, people will tell us. If we listen to God in prayer and Scripture reading our own hearts will tell us.

We can take a lesson from St. Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration. “Lord, it is good for us to be here!” He was right about that. “Let me make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Now he was trying to take charge, manage the situation, make it last, possess it, possess Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in all their transcendent glory by playing host. Then that corrective voice boomed out of the cloud: “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” It put Peter, James, and John on their faces. They were now prepared to listen, and what did Jesus say to them?

“Get up. Do not be afraid.” Fear has a lot to do with greed. We worry about having enough and so work extra hard to make extra money, and then don't know when enough is enough.

If we reverence our Creator and remember that all things come from Him and will return to Him, if we listen to what He has to tell us about who we are and why we are here, then we can leave fear behind and trust Him with the future. We will be content with having enough, and discover the riches to be found all around us in things money cannot buy. No need to spend ourselves in restless pursuit of vapors, heaping up gold that another will squander. The deadly sin of greed can get no purchase on us once we know who we are, children of God, and why we are here, to inherit a kingdom.