



# The Seven Deadly Sins (and Their Corresponding Virtues)

## SESSION 3—GREED AND GENEROSITY

| *Where is the place of generosity in a world that celebrates greed?*

### Introduction

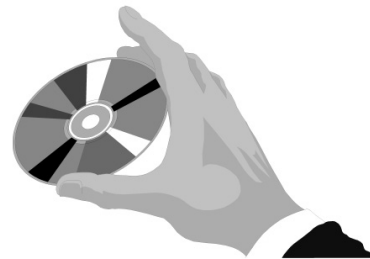
Several years ago in the movie *Wall Street*, the character Gordon Gekko proclaimed that “greed is good.” Readers of this study probably would reject that claim and view anyone who seriously made such an assertion as morally suspect. No doubt we can all think of other characters—real or fictional—who could be identified with the vice of greed.

That greed is so obvious and obviously wrong, however, does not mean we have it under control. As the church has long recognized, greed is prominent among the vices that hide under the pretext of virtue. This is to say, greed is adept at cloaking itself in the guise of higher ideals and noble ends.

In what follows, we are going to consider greed and its opposite, generosity. After raising a few commonplace ways we attempt to avoid facing the problem of greed, we will turn to the complex character of greed today. Then we will consider the virtue of generosity. This comparison sheds light on the spiritual problem at the heart of greed as well as the spiritual truth that makes it possible for Christians to be a generous people in a world where too often it seems that greed is necessary, if not good.

### Avoiding the Problem

Money is not a popular topic in church. Few subjects will get us squirming in the pews more than an open discussion of money and how we use it. For instance, how many of us would be willing to show our checkbooks or



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credit card statements to our best friends, let alone the person in the pew near us on a Sunday morning? Likewise, consider the discomfort of church leadership and laity alike when the annual stewardship campaign rolls around. When the subject is focused more narrowly on vices associated with money, like greed, our anxiety is heightened even more.

But when it comes to greed we have developed several ways to avoid the problem. Consider the text that has been at the heart of the church’s wrestling with greed. First Timothy 6:9–10 says, “Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

In our eagerness to distance ourselves from greed, we quickly point out that the text says it is not *possessing* wealth or even *desiring* wealth that is a problem, but *loving* it. So we insist as we strive to accumulate more wealth that we are not loving it, are not trusting in it. By means of a kind of mental gymnastics that is often little

more than assertion and self-deception, we insist we are maintaining an internal detachment from wealth.

Or we deny that we desire to be rich at all and declare our goals more modest and laudable, that we just want to “be comfortable” or “provide for our children.” To reassure ourselves we point to other people with larger incomes, homes, and cars as “the rich” whom this text is really addressing.

Or instead of denying our efforts to accumulate riches, we declare with gratitude that God has enabled that accumulation. We attempt to sanctify our accumulation by attributing it to God, as if our wealth fell from heaven like manna with no relation either to our life choices or the commodity chains and political and economic processes that delivered them to us.

Try as we might, though, greed is not so easily dismissed.

## What Is Greed?

The Greek text of the passage from 1 Timothy suggests that greed is a kind of craving, a clutching or snatching associated with extending the arm or hand to grasp or take something. It is desire deformed into an acquisitive and possessive power. Think of the commandment against coveting (Exod. 20:17) or the prophet denouncing persons who reach out to “join house to house” and “add field to field” (Isa. 5:8). It is a craving to acquire and possess.

One figure or image of greed that comes to mind is the hoarder or miser, who relentlessly acquires and then jealously guards possessions. This is the image of the greedy that comes through in several of Jesus’ parables. Consider the parable of the Rich Man whose land produced abundantly. In response he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones in which to store his grain and goods, only to discover that very night he would die (Luke 12:13–21). Or recall the parable of Talents, in which a servant faces the harshest judgment from his master after hiding his wealth by burying it in the ground (Matt. 25:14–30).

Such is the traditional and popular image of the greedy: one who is acquisitive and possessive, who seeks to accumulate great amounts of material wealth. Have we outgrown this? Have we moved beyond greed?

After all, one would be hard pressed to defend the suggestion that in contemporary society there are too many hoarders, too many misers, too many who seek to accumulate and possess and lock things away in bigger barns or bury their treasure underground. To the contrary, debt, not hoarding, is the more significant problem. We are not oversavers but overspenders.

Hence when we look in the mirror the image we are more likely to see is the prodigal consumer in whose hand nothing stays for long. We see one for whom accumulation matters little. We are constantly discarding (whether to the thrift store, the dump, or self-storage) in favor of the upgrade, the update, the next and the newest, the bigger and the better.

So perhaps we have outgrown greed? I do not mean to suggest that we have outgrown greed *morally*. Rather I am asking if we have rendered the condemnation of greed at best pointless and at worst counterproductive. Have we not come up with something *more effective* than condemning greed? After all, we know that hoarding—we call it saving—is a vehicle for economic growth as it makes more resources available for lending and investment. Likewise, consumption—we call it spending—is also crucial for economic growth. And the conspicuous consumption of the rich, we are told, is just the down payment on the material advances that sooner or later everyone will enjoy. So maybe greed really is good?

Try as we might, though, greed is not so easily tamed.

For greed is more than a craving for material goods and more than a matter of possession and accumulation. In its narrowest sense, greed is associated with a craving for monetary wealth and material possessions, and it is about a desire to accumulate and possess. However, alongside the narrower and more popular sense, the church has also recognized a broader sense of greed. In its broader sense, greed is more than a materialist vice, encompassing not just material possessions but also intangible things associated with the human spirit, like honor, knowledge, and authority or power. Thus those who are greedy might not be at all materialistic in the popular sense of the term. Yet by craving honor or prominence, for instance, they are just as greedy as those who strive to acquire and lay aside great stores of material wealth.



The generosity of the Christian is the generosity of a beggar. After all, as Scripture and the offertory of many churches make clear, we have nothing to give apart from what we have first been given (1 Cor. 4:7; Deut. 8:17–18). Thus as we pray, we beg, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

## All-Consuming Greed

The contemporary consumer is not all that different from the traditional hoarder. Whereas one clutches material wealth while the other lets it pass through the hand, both crave. The hoarder craves material goods while the consumer craves recognition.

In a consumer society, commodities come to us as naked objects, with no binding purpose, meaning, or obligation attached to them. (The very notion that a commodity might impose an obligation upon us strikes us as odd; that is proof enough of my point.) Thus, for example, neither the clothing I purchase at the mall nor the food I buy at the supermarket bring with them any obligation toward those anonymous persons who produced them. That is a primary benefit of the anonymity of the global market. I am under no obligation to consider the producer and it would likely be quite difficult to do so even if I wanted to. This stripping from commodities of the normal bonds of relationships is further enhanced by the fact that I purchase the goods. The exchange value represented by the price is the extent of the obligation those goods mediate.

Contrast this with the vegetables that my neighbor gives me every summer. In accepting those peppers I am drawn into a relationship with expectations that I did not choose and from which I cannot easily extricate myself. (Even refusing that gift draws me into a relationship and expectations I do not choose and short of moving cannot easily escape.)

Once purchased, commodities are naked until I choose what they mean. In this way commodities serve as instruments of my self-expression; they become part of my effort to construct my identity, who I am, how I am recognized by others. In a consumer culture, consumers use goods either to stand out or to fit in. Or perhaps

both. Consumers consume to be recognized as fitting in or as standing out.

So it is that consumers crave no less than hoarders. While they do not crave the accumulation of material goods, their passion for recognition is no less intense, as is evidenced by the great debts to which they will descend in order to achieve it.

## Seeking Security, Craving More

We are now drawing near to the heart of the matter. Greed is not simply about material wealth; it can also be about intangibles like recognition. Nor is greed simply a matter of accumulating; it can also be about consumption and debt. What, then, is at the heart of greed?

Greed is finally a matter of the quest for security, for invulnerability, for mastery and control. Why do we build bigger barns and put things under lock and key? Why do we try to fit in or stand out? Greed is a craving for those things that we imagine will aid us in attaining security. Hoarders accumulate in the hope of securing themselves from the fickleness of fate. Consumers consume in the hope of securing themselves—their value, worth, significance—in the eyes of their peers.

Yet the greedy are like those who would build on shifting sand. No matter how much they save or spend, hoard or consume, the prize that is security, invulnerability, control ever eludes them. And so they endlessly crave *more*. This, finally, is the nature of the vice of greed: to never recognize or be satisfied with the gift of enough.

This endless craving, this fear-driven inability to be content, is in the last analysis a spiritual problem, and to understand its nature requires that we turn to greed’s antidote, generosity.

## What Is Generosity?

Over against the vice of greed the moral tradition of the church sets the virtue that is called almsgiving, beneficence, or liberality. For clarity, let’s call it generosity. If greed is synonymous with the clutching hand, generosity’s likeness is the open hand, as when the Lord instructs Israel not to be tight-fisted toward its neighbors, particularly the poor and needy (Deut. 15:7–11). Or when Jesus instructs disciples to give without thought of return (Luke 6:35; cf. Matt. 19:21). Or when Paul lifts

up before the church the paradigmatic instance of generosity: Christ himself, though in the form of God, did not clutch or cling to that but instead gave himself to us for our redemption (Phil. 2:5–11; cf. 2 Cor. 8:9).

When we consider images or figures of generosity we must begin not with the sharer but with the beggar. The generosity of the Christian is the generosity of a beggar. After all, as Scripture and the offertory of many churches make clear, we have nothing to give apart from what we have first been given (1 Cor. 4:7; Deut. 8:17–18). Thus as we pray, we beg, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Beginning with the image of the beggar is significant for the way it fundamentally alters how Christians understand themselves to be sharers. The open hand of generosity is first a hand that is open to receive from the Lord. The Christian practice of generosity is rooted in God’s gracious providence. We open our hands, we give to all who ask with no thought of return, we give everything because in Christ we have been given everything. As Martin Luther wrote, we have been given such great abundance in Christ that all our labors and indeed our whole life become a surplus with which to serve and do good to our neighbors.<sup>1</sup> All that we have and all that we are is given by the Lord, and so we give all that we have and all that we are in love to our neighbors out of gratitude for God’s good gifts.

## Who Do You Trust?

This illuminates the spiritual problem at the core of greed. In the end, greed is an expression of a lack of trust in God. The greedy are locked in a world of scarcity because they do not trust in God’s providence. They do not trust that God will provide what they really need. They are not content with God’s provision. They do not believe that being rich in good works, generous, and ready to share is the path to life that is really life (1 Tim. 6:17–19). Instead, notwithstanding the ways they attempt to conceal it, including invoking God’s name to sanctify their accumulation and consumption, the greedy trust in the strength and cunning of their arms to secure their lives.

The virtue of generosity, in contrast, is anchored *not* in the strength of our arms, as though we can be generous only *after* we have successfully grasped and attained (cf. Mark 12:41–44). Rather generosity is an expression

of trust in God’s fidelity to the promises of Scripture: Because the Lord is our shepherd, we cannot lack (Ps. 23:1). Though we give away our very lives, they finally cannot be lost, because in giving even our lives, we shall find them (Matt. 10:39; 16:25). Though we heed Paul’s exhortation and give after the example of Christ, even to the point of death on the cross, God provides in the form of resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Simply put, we are generous because God is generous, and we are generous without end because we cannot reach the end of or exhaust God’s gracious abundance. We simply cannot outgive God.

## Securing a Welcome in Eternal Homes

In the parable of the Dishonest Steward, Jesus warns his disciples that they cannot serve God and wealth (Luke 16:1–13). He further advises his disciples that they would be wise to use this world’s wealth to make friends so that when that worldly wealth is gone disciples may be welcomed into their eternal homes. Yet who are these friends who have eternal homes? Jesus makes it clear in the Sermon on the Plain: “Blessed are you who are hungry now. . . . Woe to you who are rich” (Luke 6:20–25). Lest we missed it he repeats this answer immediately after the parable of the Dishonest Steward as he tells the story of the rich man who died and went to hell while the poor man, Lazarus, was welcomed into an eternal home (16:19–31).

Jesus’ point is that those who would follow him are to have open hands, generously giving to those who are in need here and now, so that in the life to come we might be welcomed into the eternal homes of those who were hungry and in need in this world. May we indeed be generous after the example of our Lord, lest like the rich man and the greedy, in the end we discover that what little we have managed to grasp, clutch, and consume in this world is our only consolation (Luke 6:24).

## About the Writer

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## For More Information

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## Endnote

1. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 365–66.