“The Seven Deadly Sins: Greed”

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Texts: 2 Kings 5:15-27; Matthew 6:19-21

If some of the names in our Old Testament reading sound familiar, that’s because today’s text is a continuation of our Old Testament passage two weeks ago when we studied Pride. In that text, we met Naaman, the Aramaean warrior who had leprosy. Naaman went to Samaria and there ate a good dose of humble pie when Elisha the prophet refused to meet with him. Elisha’s servant told Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan seven times and he would be cured. Naaman was furious and refused to do it until his servants approached him and basically asked, “what harm could it do to try?” Naaman reluctantly takes a dip in the Jordan and is healed of his leprosy. Today’s text picks up right where we left off two weeks ago — right after Naaman is healed.

Today’s Old Testament text is 2 Kings 5:15-27.

Then Naaman returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before Elisha and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present form your servant.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!”

He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, “If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count.” Elisha said to him, “Go in peace.”

But when Naaman had gone from him a short distance, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, “My master has let that Aramean Naaman off to lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something out of him.” So Gehazi went after Naaman.

When Naaman saw someone running after him, he jumped down from the chariot to meet him and said, “Is everything all right?” He replied, “Yes, but my master has sent me to say, ‘Two members of a company of prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim; please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.’” Naaman said, “Please accept two talents.” He urged him, and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothing, and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them in front of Gehazi.

When he came to the citadel, he took the bags from them, and stored them inside; he dismissed the men, and they left.

He went in and stood before his master; and Elisha said to him, “Where have you been, Gehazi?” He answered, “Your servant has not gone anywhere at all.” But he said to him, “Did I not go with you in spirit when someone left his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to accept money and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves?

Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever.” So he left his presence leprous, as white as snow.

Our Gospel reading for today comes from Matthew 6:19-21.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

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In my previous job in Memphis, I worked with young adults who we defined as adults between the ages of 22 and 40. One of my responsibilities was to lead the young adult Sunday school each week. One semester we spent our time studying a book called, “Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People.” The book examined different ways that groups of Christians might practice their faith together. It took on such topics as singing our faith, dying well, and household economics.

While the young adults were open to discussing how music can be used to give voice to experiences of faith at important times in our lives , or how a healthy, Christian view of death can help both a dying person and their loved ones make that final transition faithfully, the week we spent discussing household economics as a faith practice involved a whole lot of squirming.

We began our discussion on faithful uses of our money by discussing personal ways to incorporate our checking accounts into a life of faith. That part of the discussion went fine. Everyone was game to talk about how they can personally practice their faith in this way.

It was when the discussion moved from personal practice to corporate practice that the squirming began. The chapter in the book talked about several faith communities who practiced household economics together.

One Mennonite community covenanted to tithing 12%. 10% went to their church, 1% to a local cause of their choice, and the other 1% went to a global cause of their choosing. This group even went so far as to bring their 1040 tax forms to a meeting each year to hold each other accountable to their commitment. It was when I told the young adults about this group that they began to protest.

“No way would I do that!” “That’s crazy!” “I don’t even want to show myself that form.”

When I pressed them to explore why this idea was so outlandishto them, they couldn’t quite say. And it was an interesting idea to explore. Because the young adult group, especially the ones who showed up for Sunday school each week, were a pretty close-knit group. They worshipped together each week, attended supper clubs together, debated each other at Theology on Tap, organized meal trains when someone gave birth, and grieved deeply for one another when a parent passed away unexpectedly.

So why was money the one topic they wouldn’t discuss? What’s behind their protests?

Of all the sins we’ve discussed this series, I think this one might be the most uncomfortable to talk about. On the surface it might be lust, but I think the sin that really makes us squirm, is greed.

Because this is a sin that we’re all guilty of, whether or not we’d like to admit it.

Much like pride, there’s a fine line between actually needing things and wanting things. Walking that line is hard, and we’ve all at one point or another crossed the line between needing and wanting a thing.

We all need things, right? We need clothes and food and shelter.

But do we *need* the designer-brand jacket or purse or the Krispy Kreme donut burgers? Probably not.

Delish, a food-based website published an article in December called, “7 Ridiculous Foods We Secretly Loved in 2017.” The list is embarrassingly indulgent. Some highlights are macaroni and cheese-stuffed cheetohs and a gourmet cheese Advent calendar. Surely we don’t *need* these things.

You might be thinking right now, “Is Sarah just preaching on gluttony again? Did John and Sarah decide that we didn’t listen hard enough last week and we need a repeat this week?”

The answer is complicated. The answer is “no, but.” The more I read and thought about greed this week, the more I saw its overlap with gluttony. No, this sermon is not about gluttony, but man, it is close. So what’s the difference between gluttony and greed?

Last week, John quoted Will Willimon’s assessment of gluttony saying that if there was one word to describe gluttony, it’s the word “too.” T-o-o. In his chapter on greed, Willimon says if there’s one word to describe greed, it’s “mine.” I mentioned this to a Covenant member this week and she added, “and not yours.”

Mine, and not yours. That’s the difference. Where gluttony tends to be a sin that, for the most part, affects only the glutton, greed causes a rift between the guilty party and those around them. Greed is a sin that separates.

In his essay on greed, James Ogilvy says that, “Greed turns love into lust, leisure into sloth, hunger into gluttony, honor into pride, righteous indignation into anger, and admiration into envy. If it weren’t for greed,” Ogilvy says, “we would suffer fewer of the vices.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

In today’s text, we meet Gehazi, Elisha’s servant, for whom greed is his vice. Upon seeing Elisha decline Naaman’s gift, he decides to take matters into his own hands. He runs after Naaman and makes up a lie about two prophets visiting Elisha. He tells Naaman that Elisha has changed his mind and would Naaman be so kind as to give the visiting prophets just a little bit of money and maybe a change of clothes?

If we dig deeper into Gehazi’s lie, we can see how his greed has taken over and made him into a manipulative liar. He asks Naaman for one talent of silver. A talent is 75 pounds.

That may seem like a lot to us, but when the king of Aram sent Naaman to Samaria, he loaded him down with 750 pounds of silver as well as a bunch of gold and 10 sets of clothing. Gehazi is being strategic with his ask. He figures that if he asks for what he considers to be a reasonable amount, then Naaman is likely to believe him.

And Naaman does. In fact, he says to Gehazi, “Don’t just take 75 pounds of silver, take 150! And here are the clothes that you asked for, and here are two servants to carry this load for you! Please, please take them with you!” Naaman even *gift wraps* all of this loot for Gehazi.

Gehazi walks with Naaman’s servants back to the city. When they pass the citadel, he stashes his loot and dismisses the servants. Gehazi was never planning on taking that money back to Elisha. Everything he has done up until this point has been purely motivated by greed.

He runs into Elisha who knows exactly what Gehazi has been up to. But he gives him an opportunity to tell the truth. “Where have you been, Gehazi?” Elisha asks. “Your servant hasn’t gone anywhere,” Gehazi answers. But Elisha knows. He is a prophet after all. He tells Gehazi that his spirit traveled with Gehazi to Naaman and he knows exactly what happened.

Elisha knows that Gehazi has been unfaithful to him and has stolen from Naaman.

Elisha punishes Gehazi by afflicting him with the same leprosy that Elisha has just cured Naaman of.

Gehazi is a perfect example of the “mine and not yours” mentality of greed and of how easily greed can begin to manipulate a person’s will. Gehazi’s motivation behind stealing from Naaman is greed mixed with racism. He says to himself, “I can’t believe Elisha let this Aramean off without payment. If he’s not going to make Naaman pay, I will.”

Gehazi’s greed keeps growing inside of him as he walks off with the silver. Maybe he really was planning on giving the silver and clothing to Elisha. But then as he’s following the servants who are heavy-laden with loot he says to himself, “Well, if Elisha can’t appreciate some extra cash, maybe I will just enjoy it myself.” Mine, and not yours.

Gehazi’s greed affects not only him, but those around him. He robbed Naaman. He has broken his trust with Elisha. He not only has leprosy now, but this awful disease will be passed down from him to his future generations.

In his attempt to acquire riches, Gehazi also manages to acquire leprosy. Unlike the prophet, Gehazi did not see this turn of events coming.

We are a society that has become obsessed with acquisition. We spend our time and money trying to get to the next level, convinced that once we arrive, we will be satisfied. But much like gluttons, we never are.

The Quakers have a beautiful word for this — Cumbered. J. Brent Bill says that the word cumbered describes how “the things we own (or think we own) weigh us down and steal attention away from the life of the Spirit. Being cumbered is how the things we own end up owning us.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Quaker writer Mark A. Burch says that cumber “ implies that there is someone who wants to move toward a goal, to which cumber blocks the way.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

What cumbers us? It’s unique for everyone. For Gehazi, it was money, pure and simple.

But what cumbers me may not cumber you. It could be money. But it could also be clothes, cars, or shelter, or any other of a million different status symbols. Anything that causes a rift between myself and God or myself and neighbor is cumbersome.

In order for us to rid ourselves of all of those things that are stumbling blocks for us, we need to become practitioners of the virtue opposite of greed. We need to be practitioners of generosity. We need to become practiced in the art of giving unto others and giving back to God.

Practicing generosity begins with tithing. Tithing is acknowledging the many blessings in our lives and traditionally giving back to the Lord a tenth of those blessings. And that 10% can feel like a lot.

I remember when my parents increased my allowance to ten dollars a week. They had increased the amount of household tasks for which I was responsible and so they felt that an increase in allowance was appropriate. My mom came to me and told me about this substantial raise and I immediately started adding up in my head how many weeks it would take me to get my American Girl doll that I’d had my eyes on for months.

In the middle of my imaginings, I heard my mom say, “And you’ll give one dollar a week to the church.” I immediately started protesting. “Wait. What? Why? Why do I have to give a dollar back of my hard earned money?” My mom explained to me about tithing and giving back a tenth of my income to God. What she said sounded reasonable, but a tenth seemed like so much to 10 year old me. I thought about it and asked if she couldn’t raise my allowance to 11 dollars a week so that giving back the one dollar wouldn’t hurt so much. “No deal,” said my mom. It’s supposed to hurt a little bit. From that week on, I grumpily put my dollar in the offering plate when it was passed around. My mom was right. It did hurt a little bit.

Traditionally, tithing has a little bit of pain surrounding it. During Lent, we give up things that bring pleasure as we make our way toward the cross and Easter. Lent also happens to take up a tenth of the year. That is no coincidence.

But perhaps we have been looking at tithing the wrong way. Perhaps we should start viewing it as our first step in our battle against our tendency to be greedy.

Will Willmon offers this perspective: “For me and my house, that ten percent is a sign of our freedom. We may give far too much of ourselves away to acquisitiveness, yet at least there is a percentage of our souls that is, by the grace of God, yet free.”[[4]](#footnote-5) For Willimon, tithing is a chance to say to our culture, “You don’t dictate who I am!” Tithing is a reminder not only of who we are, but whose we are.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.”

In a world in which we are bombarded by advertisements informing us of how incomplete the world deems us to be and how we should take, take, take to climb up to the top, thanks be to God for a Gospel that meets us where we are, that reminds us of God’s claim on our lives.

We are the People of God. We are a people to whom God has said, “I love you just the way you are. You are enough. You don’t need all the things. You are enough.”

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. James Ogilvy. “Greed.” Wicked Pleasures: Meditations on the Seven “Deadly” Sins [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. J. Brent Bill. “Life Lessons From a Bad Quaker.” 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Mark A. Burch. “Come All Ye Who Are Heavily Cumbered.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Will Willmon. “Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins” 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)