

# What's wrong with me? Greed

Message for Sunday, November 12, 2017  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Hebrews 13:5; Acts 20:35

**Children's Message:** from Hebrews 13:5

Ask for an adult volunteer from the congregation, someone who likes chocolate. Tell that person to leave the room for a minute.

Say to the children, "Right now, *Name* looks pretty happy, wouldn't you say? I'm going to give *Name* some chocolate, and that is going to make him/her unhappy. Watch how I do it." Have someone fetch the person.

"Here, have a piece of chocolate. On this paper I have written a number from 1 to 10. If you guess the number correctly, you get to have the rest of the chocolate bar. If you are within one of the number, you get another piece of chocolate." [The number is 10, so there is only a slight chance of getting it right.]

Afterwards: when you came to church today, were you hungry? Were you thinking about chocolate? Who put those thoughts into your mind? (I did!) Do you wish you had guessed right, and got some more chocolate? Would you be happy if I gave you the rest of the chocolate bar right now, even though you guessed wrong?

Well, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to keep it. You can go and sit down now. Thank-you for being part of this.

[To the children:] See! Before this started, he was happy; he wasn't thinking about chocolate. I gave him chocolate, but I made him unhappy! Why? *Because I created in him the desire for more.*

That's how advertising works. They show you a picture of someone having fun with a new game or toy or doll, and now you want it, too. 60 seconds ago you were happy; now you're unhappy. The message they give you is, "If you buy this (or get your parents to buy it for you), then you'll be happy again."

Don't get tricked by those people who are trying to make you unhappy, just so you'll buy their product.

Let's listen to what God teaches us in the Bible:

Hebrews 13:5, New International Version:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

The Bible tells us: *be content with what you have.* "Be content." That means saying, "I have enough. I'm happy with what I have. I am content."

When you see an advertisement, in a magazine or on TV or in a catalogue, remember this: their goal is to make you unhappy with what you have, so that you want more. Being content is when you say, "I don't need that. I'm happy with what I have."

**Message:** "What's wrong with me? Greed"

This is part of the series of messages on the Seven Deadly Sins. We're doing this so that we can better understand the problems we face, and how to deal with them. Today's Deadly Sin is greed.

## 1) Greed can take control of our lives

I'll begin with a story from *The New York Times*.

It's a story told by a young Wall Street trader who found himself addicted to money—not just to money, but to *more* money. I'm going to let him tell the story in his own words.

Eight years ago, I walked onto the trading floor at a bank in Boston to begin my summer internship. I already knew I wanted to be rich. When I walked onto that trading floor for the first time and saw those glowing flat screen TVs, high-tech computer monitors, and phone turrets, I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I was competitive and ambitious—a wrestler at Columbia University. After graduation, I got a job at Bank of America. I was sharp, clear-eyed, and hardworking. At the end of my first year, I was thrilled to receive a \$40,000 bonus. For the first time in my life, I didn't have to balance my checkbook before withdrawing money. Over the next few years, I worked like a maniac and climbed the ladder. Four years later, I made \$2 million a year, rented a \$6,000 per month loft apartment, and got myself a girlfriend. I could go to any restaurant in Manhattan or be second row at the Knicks-Lakers game, just by picking up the phone.

Still, I was nagged by envy. On a trading floor, everyone sits together. When the guy

next to you makes \$10 million, your \$2 million doesn't look so sweet anymore. I went to work for a hedge fund, working elbow-to-elbow with billionaires, and became a giant fireball of greed. In my eighth year on Wall Street, my bonus was \$3.6 million, and I was angry because it wasn't enough.

To make a long story short, that ended up being his last year on Wall Street. At a certain point, he woke up to how greed was taking over his life. He also saw what it did to those around him. So he walked away from it all. The first year was incredibly hard, he said: waking up at night panicked about running out of money, scouring the newspapers to see which of his old co-workers had gotten promoted. Over time, it got easier, but his addiction to wealth hasn't fully gone away. He admits he still buys lottery tickets sometimes.

Not many of us will make or see that kind of money in our lifetime, but we are just as vulnerable to the deadly sin of greed. Like the other vices we've been talking about, greed robs us of joy, ruins our relationships, and drives a wedge between us and God.

Greed is defined as "an insatiable desire for more than you need." The word insatiable means "cannot be satisfied." The problem with greed is that it's never satisfied; you never have enough.

Here are some symptoms that greed is taking over your life.

#### **a) Anxiety over money**

You don't just manage your money; you worry about it. If you're married, you argue about it with your spouse. It's usually the result of spending more than you take in. Now you can't pay the bills, you're in trouble, and you're afraid.

#### **b) Selfishness**

There is no joy in giving. You do it, but grudgingly. It means you have less to get things for yourself.

#### **c) Not enough**

You don't have enough. You "need" more. And more besides that.

Greed loves "get rich quick" schemes. It loves lottery tickets—that is, trying to get rich by

gambling instead of working for it. Greed constantly thinks about its investments, about the rate of return. It is preoccupied with making more money.

#### **d) Discontent**

You no longer appreciate the things you have. This is the goal of advertising: to make you unhappy with what you have, to make you discontent.

Here's the final word on what God teaches us about greed:

**Hebrews 13:5, New International Version:**

**Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."**

"Never will I leave you." That's the antidote to greed: trusting God. Our security is not found in our stuff or our money. True security is based in our relationship with God. Knowing God makes all the difference in our lives.

## **2) The Healthy Virtue: Generosity**

All through this series on the Seven Deadly Sins, I always give the positive side. For every Deadly Sin there is a Healthy Virtue as an alternate. Greed is an insatiable desire for more. The opposite is generosity: cheerfully giving to others and to God.

There are a few places outside the gospels which record the words of Jesus. This is one of them.

**Acts 20:35, New Living Translation:**

**You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."**

Turn to your neighbour right now and say, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

We live in a society that is saturated with greed. There is a counter cultural way to live. The lifestyle of the New Testament is a life of generosity. A life where you say, "God, what you have given me, is yours. And I'm going to use what you have given me and I'm going to make a difference with it for your glory."

Greed is a life draining option. But generosity is a life giving option. Greed, at the end of the day, is a win-lose proposition. But generosity is a win-win

proposition. Greed is the key to paranoia. You are always afraid that somebody is going to take what you have. But generosity is the key to prosperity: using what you have been given to make a difference. Greed dries up your soul and robs you of life. But generosity is contagious and gives life.

Think about it. We all know wealthy people who are greedy, and we all know wealthy people who are generous. Who's happier? The generous ones, right? Neuroscientists have discovered that when people give something to another, pleasure centers in their brains light up. It feels good to give! It's what we were made to do.

### 3) Be generous with our time

Being generous involves more than just our money. In fact, being generous with our time is where the rubber hits the road. The time that you have is the greatest gift that you have been given. Every day that you wake up, God gives you 86,400 seconds, or 24 hours in that day. You're not guaranteed tomorrow. All you have is today. So the key is to make the best use possible of your time.

One pastor I know says that one of the best prayers he knows of is to ask regularly through the day, "God, what is the best use of my time right now?" What would happen if you prayed that prayer in the morning? After you have lunch? After work? A prayer like that will take our focus off of ourselves, and onto God's priorities.

You may be familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10 of Luke's gospel. A man had been savagely beaten and robbed, then left to die on the side of the road. Some religious leaders came along that way, saw the man, but they didn't stop to ask, "God, what's the best use of my time right now?" Because if they had, the answer would have been, "Stop whatever you had planned to do, and help this stranger in need."

Here's the thing: don't dare make that prayer unless you mean it. Unless you're willing for God to interrupt your precious plans. But if you are willing to be God's servant, to make a difference with your life, then by all means be open to this.

This morning, several people arrived here much earlier than most of the others. A couple of people

were here to get ready to give you a friendly greeting when you arrived. They figured that was the best use of their time this morning. God bless you for that. Some other people arrived early to turn on the coffee pot and set out cups and cookies for snack after church. They figured it was more important for them to serve others, than to have an extra half hour in bed. Doing God's work is a precious thing; God bless you for that.

You see, every follower of Jesus is called to be a minister. The word "minister" simply means "servant." I led a funeral service recently, and I introduced myself as "Bruce Fraser, one of the ministers of St. Paul's Church in Stirling." Another time I said that, someone asked me, "Just how many ministers are there at St. Paul's?" I said, "Oh, about fifty or sixty."

My job is to be your pastor—to lead and equip you—but we are all ministers. We are all called to be generous with our time, to use it in serving others and doing God's work.

### 4) Be generous like Jesus was

2 Corinthians 8:9, New Living Translation:

You know how full of love and kindness our Lord Jesus Christ was. Though he was very rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

This Bible verse refers to Jesus leaving behind the glory of heaven, to take on human flesh, and ultimately to give his life on the cross. Jesus is the most generous person who ever lived. And we are called to grow and become like Jesus.

One of the best ways to do that is to practise generosity. Instead of looking for ways that you can get more, watch for ways you can give more: give more time, give more love, give more of yourself.

#### Next Steps:

- J Examine yourself: "Do I show any of the symptoms of greed?"
- J Examine the alternative: generosity. Does this frighten you, as in, "It's a nice ideal, but totally impractical."
- J What is your heart's desire? What would you *like* it to be?