

Seven Sins, Seven Virtues: Greed & Generosity

1 Kings 21:1-16; Matthew 6:19-24

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Part One: Greed as Bondage

We are on our third Sunday of our summer series on the seven deadly sins and the seven holy virtues. We've covered pride/humility and envy/contentment. Today we're looking at greed/generosity.

It's been a challenge to figure out the best approach to tackle these themes.

I could get up here each week and sort of slide into "moralizing mode." This is what we must not do (be proud, envious, greedy). This is what we must do (be humble, be content, be generous).

You would all probably nod your heads in agreement. Not many of us need a great deal of intellectual convincing that the seven deadly sins are, well, *sinful* or that the seven holy virtues are *virtuous* and worthy of our aspiration and effort.

I don't think many of you came to church this morning with any doubts in your mind that greed is bad and that we shouldn't be greedy or that generosity is good, and we should be generous.

So, I'm not going to tell you what you already know. The problem isn't with what we know in these matters but with the difficulty translating what we *know* into what we *do*.

As a rule, most of us don't tend to rationally analyze things and then, after careful deliberation, decide to be greedy or envious or proud. There are rare exceptions, of course, but most of us sin *despite* our best intentions.

The problem is not inadequate information, but the human will.

This week, I came across a quote from a certain Dr. Ashley Null, one of the world's leading

authorities on the English Reformation. The quote comes out of an interview about the life and theology of Thomas Cranmer, author of the Book of Common Prayer and *de facto* founder of the Anglican Church:

According to Cranmer's anthropology, **what the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies**. The mind doesn't direct the will. The mind is actually captive to what the will wants, and the will itself, in turn, is captive to what the heart wants.¹

What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

I think this is a profoundly true statement about human nature. We are not rational creatures, much as we like to imagine that this is the case.

We are driven by desire, by emotion, by love and longing. This is why we choose what we choose and do what we do. And then our rational faculty kind of comes in the back door to justify or tell a story about what we do or have done or will do.

This increasingly being borne out by moral psychology. Jonathan Haidt, for example, has written a very influential book called, *The Righteous Mind* that essentially arrives at the same conclusion Thomas Cranmer did. *What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies*.

And of course, this is simply a translating into the realm of psychology a very old theological truth that is at the heart of a Christian understanding of human nature. Sin is the result of disordered love.

Paul puts it most memorably in Romans 7: 15-18:

For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

Our wills are, according to Paul, in bondage to sin. This is very unpopular language today, I know. But as I said last week, we need ugly words for ugly realities.

The story we just heard from 1 Kings is an object lesson in the bondage of the will to the sin of

¹ <https://mbird.com/2011/01/ashley-null-via-thomas-cranmer-on/>

greed.

King Ahab was king of Judah during the time of Elijah. He wasn't an exemplary king by any stretch of the imagination. Nor was his wife, Jezebel, who incited him to abandon the worship of Yahweh (which was a rather common occurrence among the kings of Israel and Judah back then). Before long there were altars to Baal and poles to the fertility goddess Asherah being set up throughout the land.

In our story this morning, Ahab decides that he wants a certain vineyard. The problem is that the vineyard doesn't belong to him. Also, Naboth, the owner of the vineyard, isn't in a selling mood.

Ahab returns home to Jezebel resentful and sullen. He collapses in a heap of self-pity on his bed and refuses to eat. It's a scene reminiscent of a petulant toddler on the playground who couldn't have someone else's ball and returned home pouting to mom. *But I want it...!!!!*

Jezebel looks at him with what I can only imagine was no small amount of contempt and says, essentially, "Well, you're the king aren't you? Kings don't ask, they take. What are you, some kind of pathetic commoner who has to say 'please?'"

She then sets in motion a plan to get what her husband wants. She calls a gathering and seats Naboth in a position of prominence in the assembly. She bribes two shady characters to bring a false charge of blasphemy against Naboth (two witnesses because according to the Law in Deuteronomy, that was all that was necessary to bring a charge against someone; blasphemy against God and king, because this was punishable by death). The assembly would then stone Naboth and his vineyard could be taken.

And this is precisely what happens. The murder of Naboth was a plan hatched out of a toxic combination of greed, power, and arrogance.

And once his wife had done all the dirty work for him, Naboth stopped pouting on his bed and took possession of the vineyard.

This is, obviously, a parable of greed. Naboth didn't need another vineyard. He had plenty, no doubt, as king of Judah. He wasn't short of options for places to grow vegetables.

This wasn't a promising investment opportunity for an entrepreneurial small farmer. This was the most powerful and, quite likely, most wealthy person in the land saying, "I want more."

But even more than a lesson about greed and the acquisitive desire for more, more, more, it is an enactment of the quote I mentioned earlier.

What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

Ahab and Jezebel loved the idea of more—more grapes, more wine, more status, more comfort, more... well, just *more*.

Their wills chose to believe that they were entitled to more, no matter the consequences of their desire, no matter the ethics of how they intended to get what they wanted.

And their minds justified all of this. In this case, it was simply a naked appeal to power. *Are you not the king? Should the king not have what the king wants?*

And the bondage of their will to sin led to the murder of an innocent man and the theft of his land.

This is an extreme example. Our stories are not this dramatic or obviously sinful (I hope). But I suspect that many of us are not unfamiliar with this dynamic.

We love the things of this world. Our hearts require little convincing that a little bit more would be better.

Our wills choose to spend, to acquire and accumulate, to store up, to hoard.

And our minds justify our choice. *Well, I work really hard... and so and so has quite a bit more than I do... And shouldn't resourcefulness be rewarded?... And why should I be generous when so much charity is wasted... And doesn't God want me to enjoy life?*

This is who we are. This is the way in which our loves are disoriented and turned inward. And these are the selves that we bring to confession.

Part Two: Generosity as Freedom

What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

This statement is not all bad, despite the impression I might have given thus far. It doesn't apply only in the realm of sin. It also applies when it comes to virtue, thanks be to God.

The good news is that when it comes to greed and generosity, it's not primarily about rolling up our sleeves and trying to do better. This can have some effect, but if you're anything like me, will power only gets you so far (and it's not nearly far enough!).

It's not even about rationally convincing ourselves that there are good reasons to pursue lives of simplicity and generosity instead of greedy consumption, abundant as these reasons are.

We know that human overconsumption and greed are having catastrophic effects on the planet, for example. We know that billions of dollars are spent by the advertising industry to convince us to buy things that we don't need and that won't make us happy. We know that there are desperately poor people around the world who depend upon the generosity of those with more. We know that the entire planet could not sustain seven billion people consuming at the rate of the average Canadian.

We know all of these things, but just knowing them doesn't always change a whole lot.

It's more about training ourselves to love better things for better reasons. And to pay attention to the things that we already love, in our best moments, perhaps the moments when we set the clutter aside and focus on where the things we actually cherish—happiness, fulfillment, and meaning—are found.

Yesterday morning, *The Globe and Mail* had an article called "The life-changing magic of making do." That seemed like a good headline to click on with a sermon on greed beckoning.

Most of it was pretty familiar fare. We have too much, we need to declutter, etc. There was some praise for Marie Kondo's famous charge to only keep things in our lives that spark joy (which, I presume, means that I should be discarding my toothbrush?). There was a plea to avoid products that were manufactured through unjust labour practices.

But near the end, there was a telling paragraph:

[Our overconsumption] is a bleak reflection of how distracted our stuff makes us from the things that actually make us happy: a sense of belonging, of community, of purpose. Time with family and friends. Great books. Long meals. We know all this, and yet: We are living amidst an unprecedented epidemic of loneliness, experiencing friendships through Instagram; consuming culture through Netflix; and walking alone through our neighbourhoods... We are isolated and unmoored. And with nothing to tell us who we are, we shop and shop and shop, filling our carts when we really just want to fill our lives.²

If I were to offer a summary/interpretation of this paragraph, it would be that lives spent on greedy consumption are not primarily the result of inadequate information or insufficient will,

² <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-life-changing-magic-of-making-do/>

even though these things might play a role.

Fundamentally, it is about misunderstood and misdirected love. When we pay attention to our deepest longings, the things that bring us the deepest sense of meaning and joy, the things that at our best we love, what we see is a deep hunger for belonging, community, purpose.

These are among the deepest things that we were created for. These are things that cannot be bought at Wal-Mart.

Matthew 6: 21: *Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

That's one of those phrases that is sort of part of the vocabulary of Christian faith. Most of us know it very well—perhaps we even memorized it as a child.

But what does it *mean*? Does it mean that we're storing up literal treasures up in heaven? Some people imagine life to work like this. Good deeds are kind of like tallies on some kind of a divine ledger. We even talk like this sometimes. When someone does something good or admirable, we sometimes say, "Well, there's another jewel in your crown in heaven!"

In this way, life becomes about moral scorekeeping and an exercise in delayed gratification. Our good deeds may not accomplish much here on earth, and we may have to miss out on some of the fun stuff for now, but one day, *one day*, we'll get our reward!

I don't think this is what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 6.

I think that when Jesus tells us to "store up treasures in heaven" he is saying, "give your time, your attention, your best selves to the things that will not pass away. Remember that you were made for one another, that you were created to care for the world that God has made. Remember that you do not live by bread alone, that material things cannot ultimately satisfy. Remember that human beings have a destiny beyond the world as it presently is. Remember that you were created by and for God. Remember that love is the meaning of it all because it is love that brought it all into being."

And, of course, "remember that Jesus is the ultimate treasure."

His birth, God taking on human flesh, honouring and elevating human life.

His life, the one perfect example of a human life.

His teaching, pointing the way to love, mercy, love of God and neighbour, forgiveness, self-denial, gratitude, peace, generosity, simplicity as the recipe for human flourishing.

His death and resurrection, taking on our sin, defeating death and evil, and bringing many sons

and daughters to glory.

His ascension to the right hand of the Father where he can now be always present through the Spirit to all who believe.

And his future return to usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

You cannot be devoted to this Jesus and also to a life spent on acquiring, consuming, spending, and hoarding. No one can serve two masters, as Jesus says in Matthew 6:24.

You will have attend to your loves, to set aside the ways in which love gets wrongly directed toward smaller and more destructive things, and to pay attention to the deepest things that you were made for.

What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

If we put Jesus into this equation, I think we will be people who are free from the bondage to greed and liberated toward generosity.

If we love Jesus, our wills will keep choosing his way and our minds will justify our choice because we discover that he is the path to freedom, in this life and the next.

The order matters. The older I get, the more I am convinced of this. We are what we love, first and foremost.

This is good news.

Amen.

