

7 Deadly Sins, week 3

Avarice, or Greed

Like nearly every sin, this is a basic human survival instinct that has gone beyond its usefulness. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “inordinate desire of getting and hoarding wealth.” In our contemporary culture, we might add the conspicuous display of extreme wealth as an appeal for status. A contemporary quip: “We spend what we don’t have... to purchase items we don’t need... to impress people we don’t like.” This is madness, right?

We can include the profligate (wasteful) use of wealth as an unjustifiable mismanagement of wealth that could go to any number of more important, better uses. The standard by which we measure avarice is not sacrificial poverty, nor state controlled socialism, but *faithful stewardship*. We don’t own wealth. It is merely entrusted to us to manage for a relatively brief term on our earthly journeys. And then we give our account of our management to God.

Avarice is rooted in the sin of Pride, the conviction that my life is more important than anyone else’s, and that I am accountable to nobody else. “What I do with my life and my wealth is nobody’s business but mine.” It is easy to see the spillover from self-absorption to attitudes about wealth that are primarily self-serving.

Antidote: “*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*”

[From *Steering through Chaos*, by Os Guinness]

“Mercy is not just the absence of avarice, but the presence of generosity. More than just ‘not being greedy,’ it is proactive in giving—not simply giving up wealth, but *giving out* to the needy. As William F. May wrote, ‘The true opposite of the tight-fistedness of avarice is not the empty-handedness of death, but the open-handedness of love.’”

If justice is giving everyone what they truly deserve, then mercy—also translated as lovingkindness—entails giving people better than they deserve. God treats us all mercifully. God gives us better things than we either deserve, or could ask for or imagine. Because we have received God’s mercies freely, our faithful response is to emulate this disposition. We, as God’s children, are to act like members of the God Family. We, too, extend mercy, kindness, generosity and care for others. It is the spiritual nature of God’s children to act this way.

In the parable of Lazarus, the rich man who feasts sumptuously every day while the poor man at his gate is “longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table.” His deepest wish is for food that the rich man will throw to the dogs, or toss into the garbage. The grave moral failing of the rich one in this story is *the failure even to see Lazarus*, much less to recognize his suffering, or to feel compassion and act to help him. He is simply completely absorbed in his own consuming of life’s finest things. And Jesus describes that as a fatal failure. Nothing in the world to come can reverse that failure of compassion, the absence of mercy. Jesus loves us enough to warn us.

Our Homework

1. Does my preoccupation with my privileges, possessions, and affluence sometimes (often) blind me to profound human suffering at my doorstep? How can I accept this behavior?
2. Does my church, or other community organizations, provide avenues through which I could practice merciful care for others? How can I engage in those channels?
3. R.W. Emerson wrote, “Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind.” How might the weekly/monthly discipline of sharing my wealth—charitable giving in proportion to my income—free me from this servitude to possessions, and put me in charge?