Seven Deadly Sins: Greed

I sometimes find it hard to distinguish between some of the seven deadly sins. Greed, gluttony and lust are all quite similar, in that they are all strong desires, and giving into them can easily lead to an ever-greater readiness to indulge them, even though we are aware of the long-term destructive consequences that ensue. Sometimes we distinguish between them on the basis of what it is we are longing for – so we may associate gluttony with food, lust with sex, and greed with money. And yet, when it comes to gluttony, we can over-indulge in other ways apart from eating too much; people can lust for power as well as for other people’s bodies, and the greedy person may want other things apart from money in the bank. Perhaps the right way to distinguish between these sins is to think of lust in terms of an *intense* *desire* for something, greed in terms of the *acquisition and accumulation* of what is desired, while gluttony would be about the *excessive consumption* of what is desired. So, supposing we have a box of 48 Crème Eggs in the house. Lust will mean that the longing for Crème Eggs will be so strong that that’s all I want to eat. Greed will mean that I will want to make sure that nobody else gets to eat any of the eggs, and gluttony will mean that I eat so many of them that they make me ill. Unlike lust and gluttony, there is a competitive dimension to greed: whatever it is that I want, I want to make sure that I get more of it than you do.

In Oliver Stone’s film, *Wall Street*, Gordon Gecko says that, ‘…Greed -- for lack of a better word -- is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms -- greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge -- has marked the upward surge of mankind.’ So, can greed ever be a good thing? Lots of people in Britain would disagree. According to YouGov, 43% of us think that the excessive desire for material wealth is the worst of the seven deadly sins. If you don’t agree with Gordon Gecko on this issue, why do you think greed is wrong, and how serious is it?

Take a look at Luke 12:13-21. In the parable, could we argue that the man is just being prudent in terms of planning for his future? What is it about his attitude or behaviour which makes him greedy? As Jesus applies the parable to his listeners, what lessons are there for us to take on board?

Now turn to Luke 18:18-30: ‘greed’ is not mentioned in this passage. Do you think the rich man was greedy or do you think that Jesus was asking him to do the impossible? Take another look at the ruler’s first question (18:18): was he perhaps mistaken in thinking that there was something that he could ‘do’ in order to inherit eternal life? How can rich people be saved? Chrysostom suggested that Jesus was ‘not condemning riches in themselves, but those who were enslaved by them’ (*Hom. on Matthew* 63). Do you think he is right, or is he dodging the issue? In Ephesians 5:5, Paul identifies the greedy person as someone who is guilty of idolatry. In what ways do you suppose that greed can be seen as a kind of idolatry? If we have wealth, how can we ensure that our possessions do not compromise or detract from our devotion to God (Luke 16:13)?

In his book *Myths, Lies and Downright Stupidity*, John Stossel interviews Curtis Sharpe, lottery winner of five million dollars, and Sherry Gagliardi, winner of 26 million dollars, and asks them whether winning the lottery made them happy. Gagliardi replied, ‘Yes and no. I got a divorce two years after we had won. People have a misconception about having money. You go out and you go, “Oh, that’s what I want, I’ll buy it.” Well, a couple weeks later, it’s like, you know, that emptiness comes back. Then what?’ Sharpe added, ‘I mean, how many suits can I wear? How many hats can I wear? You know what I am saying?’ Greed feeds us the lie that having more money (or whatever it is that we long for) will make us happy, but it doesn’t. What, then, is the secret of happiness or contentment? 1 Timothy 6:6-10 talks about the value of godliness with contentment. What is ‘godliness’? Is it an effective antidote against greed? If so, how and why do you suppose that to be the case?

According to Melissa Miller, charity is the antidote to greed: ‘Charity is a Christian virtue to cultivate, an alternative to the empty, unsatisfying hunger of greed. An old-fashioned term, charity speaks to us of caring for the poor, of sharing with those in need, of almsgiving. More broadly, it mirrors agape love, the kind of love that God pours out unconditionally on all people, on the whole world—probably even on pigs and ravens. Charity turns us outward, away from our greedy selves and toward the goodness and fulfillment of caring for others. May we lean into charity and away from greed’ ([The deadly sin of greed | Canadian Mennonite Magazine](https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/deadly-sin-greed)). I suspect Paul might agree (Ephesians 4:28). If learning to love set people free from the selfishness of greed, how can we teach people the secret of how to love in that kind of way?

‘Father God, we confess the sin of greed, however and wherever it is hidden in our hearts. We receive your total forgiveness and ask for a big hearted, generous love for You, which shows those we meet, how great and generous Your love is for them.

Amen. There is no greed in the Kingdom of Heaven!’ (Ian Cole, World Prayer Centre)