

## “Greed or Generosity?”

August 23, 2015

*Sinning like a Christian: The Good News series*

As we keep going with this list of the seven deadly sins, I keep thinking that each week is more difficult than the last. Pride, envy, anger, sloth or apathy? Well, today is another kicker. Greed - wanting more and never being satisfied. Certainly it has some connection with pride and envy, but greed is its own struggle, too. Even though greed is lifted up and praised by so many - that getting more and having more is a goal and a measure of success - it's not the calling we have as followers of Jesus.

Greed is the foundation of so many ads. It's tough to get away from it. It's tough to even focus on generosity when we're looking at the next best thing - a better TV, phone, house, whatever it is. “The more we have, the more we want.” We don't have to look too hard to find encouragement to buy more and get more, but when was the last time you were encouraged to give more? To give more away and let it go?

We are caught up in greed, and it starts early. The next version of the iPhone or gaming system is on the Christmas and birthday list even though there's one at home already. Comparing ourselves to one another based on what we have starts in the classroom and on the playground. We measure our personal value by what we have - and not who we are. Our wants and needs are jumbled together. Our comfort is of the utmost importance.

So I hope it's hard for us to hear Jesus' words. Our real treasure isn't in what we have or what we can get; our real treasure is in what we receive from God who is gracious and generous. The stuff we have helps us to enjoy life, but it doesn't offer us everlasting life, peace, and joy. If that's what we're banking on, then we'll be disappointed.

And then Jesus really sticks it to those who listen. You can't serve two masters. We have to be “all in” with God, and that includes giving up this incessant desire for wanting more stuff that we don't need. Our deepest need is for a connection with our Creator; it's not the best gadget or huge bank account. Do we have food, clothing, shelter, love, and friendship?

I don't deny that folks have real struggles with money and having enough. We take an offering today because we know that Kids' Food Basket is meeting a need that is real. Kids need to eat meals that will help them grow strong and learn well. We are a part of the ministry that helps to make it happen.

And, it's important to consider that a lot of the world population survives on so much less than you and I have. There's a statistic that I read: If you have food in your fridge, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep you are richer than 75% of the world. If you have money in the bank, your wallet, and some spare change you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy. And another note: more than one-third of the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day. We can't imagine that, but maybe you've seen another way of life if you've traveled.

Perspective is important as we think about greed and generosity. We can get caught up in thinking about all those who are so wealthy and those who have orchestrated schemes to get rich. But Jesus' words aren't just for them; they're for us. Greed isn't about those who have more than we do; greed is how we look at money and stuff. Greed is about our wants winning out over our needs. It's about not knowing what we really need - and about desiring things instead of seeking God. If I just had this and that or that, then I'd be good. I'd be happy. I'd be OK. I'd feel secure.

Jesus tells us not to hold onto what we have with the thought that we'll grow in faith and status. Instead he shows us what it means to be generous - to give away everything - to sacrifice. When we do, we gain a deeper understanding of who God is and how God loves us and others. William White says, "Serving God is a two-handed call." We can't serve God while we're hanging on to what we have.

There's the "deadly" part of greed. When we're focused on getting more and wanting more, we're not looking around at the needs and opportunities. We're more concerned for self than for others, and that creates a wall between us and others. It creates competition. It alienates us from each other. Proverbs 28:25 says, "The greedy stir up conflict, but those who trust in the LORD will prosper." Proverbs 11:24..."One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want." Greed keeps us not looking to God for answers about how to live, but thinking that something else will bring ultimate happiness and joy.

Some would argue that God wants us to have it all. In the year 2000, Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking through to the Blessed Life* was published and began to fly off bookstore shelves at an amazing rate. It was a New York Times bestseller and earned Wilkinson many Christian book awards. How many of you have heard of Jabez or have the book? How many have read it? It made quite an impact on the world!

Now, I don't agree with everything that Wilkinson writes about prayer in general or Jabez's prayer specifically. This could easily slip into a "prosperity gospel" where we get what we want when we want it. However, I appreciate that Wilkinson lifts up Jabez and challenges us to look at him and his prayer. Jabez's story can enrich our prayer life

and teach us to come to God with confidence and trust. His prayer is daring, simple, and direct. He believes what he prays: But Jabez prayed to the God of Israel, “Bless me, God, and give me much land. Be with me and keep me from anything evil that might cause me pain.” And God gave him what he prayed for.

Jabez appears in the genealogy in First Chronicles, which tells the history of the Israelites. It’s a family tree to give the reader a sense of how the kingdom of Israel came to be what it is. Remember that after Jacob wrestled with God, he was given a new name – Israel. Jacob had twelve sons who along with their descendants lived as tribes – the twelve tribes of Israel – but eventually the tribes formed a kingdom as a way to keep the threat of foreign invaders away.

Saul became their first king, followed by King David, who was successful in growing Israel into a powerful kingdom. The kingdom split into two, creating the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The kingdom of Judah was made up of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. In all of this genealogy, Jabez is a descendant of Judah.

First Chronicles recounts the reign of King David, including his ancestry. But it was actually written sometime after the Israelites were taken into captivity in Babylon, which happened in 586 BC. Perhaps it was written as a way to encourage the Israelites after the difficult times they had endured. The Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, and their lives had been turned upside down. Remembering where they came from was important as they re-built their lives.

We’re told that Jabez is an honorable man – or at least more so than his brothers. And Jabez reminds us that ***prayer does involve asking for something***. I’ll confess to you that Jabez sounds selfish to me when he asks for God to bless him. But his willingness to ask shows his faith and trust in God. He believes that God can bless him! And he’s not the first person to ask for God’s blessing – Jacob demanded it when he wrestled with God.

And if we struggle with asking God to bless us, if it sounds selfish, perhaps we need to regain that very crucial aspect of our relationship – remembering that God does bless us. First, we need to understand that blessing is something that comes from God. A blessing is something only God can give. So when we ask for God’s blessing, we’re saying that it’s up to God to act. We’re putting our trust in God. We’re asking God to do what God wants to do – nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

Secondly, do we believe what we pray for? Do we believe that God is a God who blesses us? Do we believe that it’s God’s nature to bless? Do we believe that God is good and that God wants the best for us? Are we willing to pray with courage and boldness to God who blesses?

And if we believe that God blesses, then we're called to be people who bless others. That's where generosity comes in. We worship God who is generous to us - abounding in steadfast love. We love and serve God who comes to us and shows us that there is no greater love than what Jesus shows us on the cross.

Generosity goes against greed. Generosity turns our eyes and hearts toward God and others. And we learn it from each other. Certainly we experience generosity outside of these walls, but I pray that we experience it here in a powerful way. Living our faith together helps us to figure out what's important. Will Willimon says that we're "learning how to want the right things in the right way and the right proportions." Rather than "the more you get, the more you have," we hear Jesus saying, "the more you give away in love, the more you are."

When we tithe, we're recognizing God's grace in our lives. When we give an offering, we're acknowledging that what we have is a gift to be shared. When we give our time and share our gifts, we honor God.

We stand against the notion that we should have all of our desires satisfied right now. Being in church isn't about you and I getting what we want, but seeking God's kingdom first. A Kingdom where we open our hands to receive from God and give in response to God. May we be generous. Thanks be to God. AMEN.