

SERMON TITLE: "The Seven Deadly Sins: Greed"

SERMON TEXT: Luke 12:13-23

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: March 22, 2020, via Facebook Live Worship, due to Coronavirus

### **INTRODUCTION**

Wow! What a different time we're in! This coronavirus pandemic seems to have changed life as we know it. We're all wishing this would go away quickly, so we could pop back out of our hibernation caves in just a few weeks. But it looks like we're going to be in this for a long time, so I want us all to breathe deeply and stay calm. Let's make the best of our situation by practicing good hygiene, by keeping our proper social distances, and by learning how to use these new technologies so we can stay connected in Christian community.

Back in January, when I first heard that the word *quarantine* comes from the Latin word for 40, that made good sense to me. In the early centuries of Christianity, believers were trying to figure out how to survive, just like we are. And they knew that there were some practices that were more healthy and others that were more deadly. So, they created a 40-day season of Lent prior to Easter. During this period, Christians would limit their normal, worldly activities and spend more time in meditation and prayer. They would seriously consider their sins, repent of those wrongful ways, and take measures to become more like Christ. This Lenten season of spiritual quarantine allowed them to put their sins to death on Jesus' cross, so they could rise to new life with Christ on Easter.

With that background, I decided that we here at Ogden First United Methodist Church would focus our Lenten attention this year on Christianity's traditional list of "The Seven Deadly Sins." Beginning on Ash Wednesday, our church has so far discussed the deadly sins of Gluttony, Sloth, Envy, and Wrath. In upcoming weeks, we'll cover the topics of Lust and Pride. In today's sermon, though, I'm going to talk with you about a sin that has been front-and-center during this time of pandemic. Today, we're going to consider the deadly sin of Greed.

## **1—GREED IN LUKE 12**

Let's begin with our scripture reading from Luke 12. There, in verses 13-23, we see Jesus' "Parable of the Rich Fool," a story about a rich man whose land had produced abundantly. Of course, crops are only as useful as there are ways to store them. So the rich man decided he needed to build bigger barns for his abundant grain and other goods. With much larger storage capacity, he thought he would be able to eat, drink, and be merry. Happiness, he presumed, would come because he would be well prepared.

That kind of careful foresight and preparation is commended in other Bible stories. For example, in Genesis, Joseph went to Egypt and stored up seven years' worth of grain. When a time of famine came, it was Joseph's reserve that saved the Egyptian people and his own family who migrated from Canaan. Likewise, in Jesus' Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in Matthew, wise preparation was considered a good and faithful strategy. But, in Jesus' parable here in Luke 12, God doesn't approve. Instead of congratulating the rich landowner on his agricultural success, his business acumen, and his disaster preparedness, God says to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" God's condemnation isn't so much against wise preparation as it is about undue anxiety, a priority on material goods, and a heart of selfishness.

In verses 22 & 23, Jesus indicates that, better than worrying and stockpiling resources for the future, we should be trusting in God. Life is more than food and clothing, says Jesus. It isn't that we don't need those things; we do. It's just that we need to make sure that our hearts aren't treasuring *things* more than we're treasuring our relationship with *God*. Rather than being rich toward *ourselves*, Jesus calls us to the rich-toward-*God* attitudes of gratitude and generosity *to others*.

## **2—APPLICATION IN THE SEASON OF CORONAVIRUS**

So, let's use some very current examples to examine this deadly sin of greed.

How about toilet paper? One of our church members told me he just installed a bidet in his toilet, so he won't need to use paper. Another guy told me that he's been looking for Sears & Roebuck catalogs, so he could tear out the pages. (Only us older ones understand that.) That's great for those guys. But most of us still do need toilet paper. I think the question is, "How much is enough?"

In Thursday's *Standard-Examiner* newspaper, there was a cartoon that showed two role models—only the caption wasn't spelled "role," it was spelled "roll." The first "roll" model in the cartoon was a middle-aged guy in the parking lot outside a Costco store. With one arm, he was pushing a shopping cart that was completely overloaded with toilet paper from the bottom rack up about 10 feet high. As if that weren't enough, he was holding on tightly to yet another giant-sized package with his other arm. The second, and quite different, "roll" model in the cartoon was a boy who was handing over a package of TP to an elderly woman at the door of her house.

Of the two "roll" models, which one was greedy? Which one was rich toward God? Yes, we could argue that the middle-aged man was being wise and maybe only buying what he absolutely needed for his very large family, in case they all became too sick to go out to the store in the future. And we could suppose that the boy was able to generously give away toilet paper because he would have a parent, a grandparent, or other responsible adult who would plan and provide for him. And we could fuss back and forth about what *is* the right amount to prepare and stock up. But still, the toilet paper example gives us a good starting place to consider: When does prudent preparation turn into selfish greed? When does anxious worry prevent us from trusting in God?

Another example from recent news was the story about the two brothers in Tennessee who bought up a garage full of hand sanitizer—17,700 bottles, to be exact. Their intention was to re-sell it on Amazon at an inflated price, so they could make a hefty profit. Like others who have tried to price gouge on things like diapers and baby formula, those two brothers wanted to make a financial killing off the desperate need of other people. They wanted to profiteer from the pandemic. Fortunately, the

Amazon company figured out what they were doing and shut them down. Amazon refused to allow such greediness to prevail on their website. So, after getting quite a bit of bad press, the opportunistic brothers ended up redeeming themselves by donating their stockpile.

Another example from this week's news is some members of the U.S. Senate and House and their aides, who have been caught selling and buying stocks based on insider trading information. Ethical investigations will likely be started to examine exactly what they knew and when, in comparison to the timing of their financial dealings. The implication that some of those governmental leaders were downplaying the pandemic to the public while they were taking emergency measures in regard to their own personal financial interests smells a lot like greed. We elect persons to represent our collective best interests, not just to find out first and protect their own.

If we think this insider trading greed is only a sin of politicians and maybe some Wall Street types, we should think again, however. We all use insider knowledge to our own personal advantage sometimes. If we're in real estate, we might know when is the best time to buy and sell houses. If we know someone in road construction, we might get a tip of how to avoid a traffic jam. If we have a family member who works at the grocery store, we might get insider knowledge about when the canned food aisles will be restocked. If we bring food home from the store and put it away, we might know where we stashed the chocolates. That would be a greedy insider thing I might do: keeping all the Hershey kisses to myself.

Most of us have some knowledge advantages about something. The question, though, is, How we are using that information? Are we selfishly keeping it to ourselves, so only we—or only we and our inner circle of family and friends—can benefit? Or are we sharing the knowledge widely, so many people can take appropriate measures? Are we looking out for the poor and the disadvantaged, as well as those of us who are quick and able? Being rich toward God means we make an effort for the good of everyone, not just ourselves.

There's one more example of greed that I want to raise. This isn't from a specific news story, but more in-general. We really do need to consider how much we're hoarding. Greed isn't just about having the nicest, newest, and most expensive. And greed isn't just about panic buying in a pandemic. Greed can also be about the everyday practice of filling up our barns, our storage units, our garages, and our homes with old collectibles, things we might need "some day", old papers, large numbers of pets, or even absolute junk. Those of us who want more and more stuff around us, packed into every corner, need to think about how our desire for those things is hurtful. When our anxious need-to-possess creates a physical danger for ourselves, a health hazard to our neighbors, or a source of conflict and strain between us and our family members—then we need to realize that we have a serious problem with greed.

### **CONCLUSION**

Yesterday morning, I heard a radio interview with a woman in Seattle who volunteered to be tested with a possible vaccine for COVID-19. The interviewer asked her why she volunteered to test this experimental drug. What motivated her? Wasn't she afraid of possible side effects?

The woman's answer was that she is the mother of teenage boys, who are now becoming more independent. She feels fortunate to have other family members who would help look after them if something went wrong for her. She also said she's blessed to have a job in the tech industry that allows her to work from home, with a guaranteed salary, even if she were to get sick and not be able to work. She knows she's better off in many ways than millions of Americans. She realizes that this particular test vaccine might not work, but she can manage this sacrifice, and she wants to do her part to help.

That's great, isn't it, that there are people who are so grateful and generous? I think the cure for greed is a lot like that. We have to change our mindset from how much we can appropriate to how much we can appreciate. When we feel blessed by what we already have, then we don't need more and more stuff to make us feel secure and happy. Yes, we will still have to do our part to plan and prepare,

but we won't have to express anxiety in selfish, hoarding ways that hurt ourselves and others. When we trust that our loving and good God will help us through each day, we can find forgiveness and healing for the deadly sin of greed.