

“When God Used a Four-Letter Word”

Luke 12:13-21

Series: Break the Chains: Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins

Week 7: Freedom from Greed

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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John Ortberg tried to teach his children the value of money.

When our kids were little, we put them on the envelope system. When we gave them an allowance, they would put it in envelopes labeled "Give," "Save," "Gifts," and "Spend."

I thought it was working until one day I had a Band-Aid on my arm. My daughter, who at that time was about six, asked, "Why?" I explained I had a medical exam that day to get life insurance. She asked, "What's that?" I explained, "Well, Daddy loves you so much and loves the family so much, so if anything were to happen to Daddy (which of course it won't, but if it would), life insurance would provide \$250,000." She has a tender heart, and I knew she'd be worried. She looked up at me with really wide eyes and said, "Each?" I'm not sure the right lesson is getting communicated.¹

It starts young. In this series “Break the Chains: Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins” we come to the last sin – the one most people abhor, but few can admit: Greed. In a Zogby poll respondents identified "greed/materialism" as the number one "most urgent problem in American culture." "What is the deadliest sin?" readers of the Economist ranked greed number one.

Everyone thinks greed is a terrible problem, yet most people don't think they are greedy. In a poll on the seven deadly sins, the BBC asked two questions: ‘Which sin have you ever committed?’ and ‘Which sin have you committed in the past month?’ Greed came in last to both questions. Pastor Tim Keller, observes "even though it is clear that the world is filled with greed and materialism, almost no one thinks it is true of them. Greed hides itself from the victim."²

What is Greed? One definition is an “intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth, power, or status. An inordinate desire to acquire or possess more than one needs.” Why is it so hard to see greed in our lives?

We Confuse Wants With Needs. While purging files in my office recently, I discovered papers I saved from seminary. That’s more than three decades ago. Why did I keep them? The seven last words of the hoarder: “I may need this in the future.” We think we need more and more stuff. Just look on the side of the road and you will see an explosion of storage facilities. The self-storage industry expects to make \$32.7 billion in revenue this year on its 54,000 storage facilities. There are 2.63 billion sq. ft. of storage space or 8.32 sq. ft. of storage for each man, woman and child in America. At the same time the average size of American houses is growing

¹ John Ortberg, "The Ten Financial Commandments,"

² Ted Scofield, "Everybody Else's Problem, Pt. 2," Mockingbird blog (7-28-15)

while the average size of the American family is shrinking. So houses are getting bigger, families are getting smaller, and we still need almost 3 billion extra square feet for our stuff.³

We Equate Abundant Stuff with Abundant Life. An article in The Atlantic demonstrated how, in the last 100 years, we turned yesterday's luxuries into today's necessities.

In 1900, less than 10% of families owned a stove, access to electricity or phones

In 1915, less than 10% of families owned a car

In 1930, less than 10% of families owned a refrigerator or clothes washer

In 1945, less than 10% of families owned a clothes dryer or air-conditioning

In 1960, less than 10% of families owned a dishwasher or color TV

In 1975, less than 10% of families owned a microwave

In 1990, less than 10% of families had a cell phone or access to the internet

Today, at least 90 percent of the country has a stove, electricity, car, fridge, clothes washer, air-conditioning, color TV, microwave, and cell phone. They make our lives better. They might even make us happier. But they are never enough.⁴

Now I appreciate all those modern conveniences but it seems we always want the next brighter, faster, cooler piece of technology. Once we have it we can't live without it but it's never enough. Contrast that with the people in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. When mission teams return they are often surprised at how joyful our Christian brothers and sisters are. Let's put this in perspective. The DR and Haiti are not paradise. They have disease, corruption, lack of clean water, and every door and window has bars on it. There is a lot to be unhappy about. Perhaps what really surprises us is how they can be so joyful when they don't have all the stuff we have. We have storage rooms full of stuff and are unhappy and discontent while they, at least our Christian partners, have almost nothing and they dance with joy. Why doesn't it add up? We equate abundant stuff with abundant life.

We Compare Ourselves with Wealthier People. I don't see myself as rich because I compare myself to the fraction of humans who are richer than me. What I should do is compare myself to the vast majority of people who have less. Here are some startling comparisons. This is hard to hear but please don't tune this out.

Americans comprise less than 5 percent of the world's population but we own 20 percent of the world's wealth.

One billion people in the world do not have access to clean water, while the average American uses four hundred to six hundred liters of water a day.

More than half of the world lives on less than two dollars a day, while the average American teenager spends nearly \$150 a week.

³ <https://www.sparefoot.com/self-storage/news/1432-self-storage-industry-statistics/>

⁴ Derek Thompson, "The 100-Year March of Technology in 1 Graph," The Atlantic (4-7-12).

Forty percent of people in the world lack basic sanitation. Americans spend more annually on trash bags than nearly half the world does on all goods.

1.6 billion people in the world have no electricity.

Nearly one billion people in the world cannot read or sign their name. Nearly one hundred million children are denied basic education. One in seven children worldwide (158 million) has to go to work every day just to survive.

Every seven seconds, somewhere in the world a child under age five dies of hunger, while Americans throw away 14 percent of the food we purchase.⁵

Now you can argue with these facts and deny their truth. You can throw up your hands and say the problem is too big. You can say you do your part for the poor and it's time for someone else to step up. Or you and I can see how our abundance can be part of the solution.

None of us is free from greed. It's been that way from the beginning. After all, Adam and Eve had paradise and it still wasn't enough. Jesus has a lot to say about greed and how to handle money. Sixteen of His thirty-eight parables deal with money and possession. Ten percent of the verses in the Gospels deal with the topic of money. Why? Jesus knows how easy it is for greed to turn money or possessions into idols. Case in point: a man interrupts Jesus with this demand,

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” (Luke 12:13)

He orders Jesus to take his side in a family quarrel. It's not surprising to see an inheritance divide a family. Jesus, however, refuses to be drawn into the fray.

Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” (Luke 12:14)

Jesus came to reconcile relationships not divide them. He doesn't care about inheritance but about the inner heart. He teaches **Abundant Stuff Does Not Give Abundant Life**.

Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12:15)

Jesus warns us to be on the lookout for greed, to protect our hearts from the attack of greed much as a body fights off an invading infection. Don't catch a case of *affluenza*. It will deceive you into believing that a full house of possessions equals a full life. The word “life” is *ZOE*. You may remember in our *Finding Your Way Back to God* series that God gives the *ZOE* life. In the Prodigal Son parable the younger son thought life could be found in stuff until stuff just wasn't enough. He only received the *ZOE* life, the abundant life, when he turned back to the open arms of his loving, gracious father.

⁵ Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* (Zondervan, 2008), pp. 122-123.

Charles Colson says his home town of Naples, Florida is an absolute nirvana for all golfers—twenty-seven golf courses and miles of sparkling beach and the best country clubs.

I watch these retired CEOs of major corporations; they're powerful people. But now, all of a sudden, they start measuring their lives by how many golf games they can get in. I often say to them, "Do you really want to live your life counting up the number of times you chase that little white ball around those greens?" And they kind of chuckle, but it's a nervous chuckle, because in six months they realize they're miserable. The object of life is not to achieve money, power, pleasure. That's not the Holy Grail. The object of life is the maturing of the soul, and you reflect that maturing of the soul when you care more for other people than yourself.⁶

This is why Jesus says that **Abundant Life Is Sharing With Others**. Jesus teaches this through a negative example of what not to do.

And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" (Luke 12:16-19)

On the surface this has all the markings of an American success story: abundant produce, sound financial planning, careful savings, and early retirement to a life of leisure. The rich man is ready to live happily ever after.

Yet that day never comes. For that very night, the thundering voice of God calls him a four-letter word: FOOL! Fool? What did this shrewd businessman do that was so foolish? Look more carefully at the parable. First, when the story begins he is already rich. So the abundant harvest is really surplus goods. It's icing on the cake of his fortune. He can't even find a self-storage unit to put it. When confronted with this great gift from God, he doesn't think about sharing it with his hungry neighbors. St. Ambrose once said he has plenty of room to store the grain in the mouths of the needy. Instead he builds bigger barns to keep it for himself.

Second, did you catch the loneliness of this man? He has no one to talk to but himself. There are no family and friends to share his fortune. Perhaps his greed and selfishness drove them away. Like Howard Hughes, he is lonely in the midst of his wealth. It's hard to eat, drink and be merry by yourself.

Yet the most fatal mistake of this foolish man is he thinks everything belongs to him. Did you catch how he says, 'my crops, my grain, my goods, my barns, my soul?' He believes they were all his possession to enjoy as he pleases to the end of his days.

That end came sooner than he expected.

⁶Eric Metaxas, *Socrates in the City* (Dutton, 2011), pp. 172-3

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:20-21)

Why does God call him foolish? These things are not his to keep. Tonight he must give them all up including his soul. The literal meaning of this verse is: ‘Tonight I am calling in the loan on your life.’ As we’ve seen with other deadly sins the central point of this parable is: all our possessions and even our lives are **owned** by God, but **loaned** to us. We can’t hold on to anything forever. He is foolish to keep it to himself when he could have shared it with others.

An elderly woman in Israel discovered this after a rude wake up call. She had a bad experience with the banks during 2008 and 2009 when banks all over the world were closing. So this woman decided to keep her cash close. She hid her life savings of one million dollars in her bed mattress. She must have felt very secure with her fortune holding her up each night. She kept this entirely to herself. She couldn’t trust anyone - not even her own daughter. One day her daughter surprised her with a wonderful gift: a new mattress! She thought the old one was kind of lumpy. When the delivery men brought in the new one she told them to take that old lumpy one to the dump. Her mother was delighted with the new gift and didn’t put two and two together until the next morning when she woke up and literally screamed. A news report showed the daughter and workers with bulldozers moving piles of garbage to uncover the lost treasure.⁷ We can’t hold on to anything in this life.

The rich fool learned this lesson the hard way. When God called in the loan on his life, his crops, his goods, his barns, his soul were all lost. Greed deceived him into thinking abundant stuff means abundant life. To break the chain of greed, to receive God’s abundant life you and I must share our lives with others, especially those in need. That’s what Jesus did. Paul says,

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

He gave his life for us on the cross. No greater gift was ever given. No higher price ever paid. Receive this gift of abundant life from the hand of Jesus. But don’t keep it to yourself. As He gave His life to you, share your life with others. Give the precious gift of your time, your God-given talents, and the treasure God loaned you.

You can start to do that today by giving your time and skills to building Habitat for Humanity homes right here in Bucks County. You can lead a mission project for the Church Has Left the Building on November 6. You can help desperate families who have no place to lay their heads by signing up for a job with Family Promise. Our next two sessions will be around Thanksgiving and Christmas. What better way is there to give thanks to God, to give a gift to Jesus on His birthday than to share our lives with others? It’s amazing what one person can do when they break the chain of greed and share their lives with others.

⁷ Ian Deitch, "Israeli woman mistakenly junks \$1 million mattress," www.ap.org (Associated Press).

He was an American success story. His goal: to be a millionaire before he reached thirty. By 1964, his hard work blossomed into a successful law practice and a number of lucrative companies which put him over his seven figure goal. The symbols of his prosperity were impressive: a large sprawling mansion on twenty acres, a swimming pool and a pasture for horses. He also owned a lakeside cabin, two speed boats and three cattle farms totaling 2,000 acres. Not satisfied to remain at the million dollar level, Fuller began working diligently to reach the next plateau: ten million.

To achieve the next goal required sacrifice. Though he grew up in a religious family, his growing empire left little time for God or church. His business practices became a bit shady. Someday he would make time to enjoy the fruits of his labors with his growing family. But for now they would have to wait patiently. The strain and stress brought anxiety and poor health. Yet he kept plugging away and paying whatever cost was required until the day his wife stopped him dead in his tracks. "I'm going away for a while," she said with a cool detachment. "I don't know if we've got a future together or not." At that moment, Millard Fuller took a hard look at the balance sheet of his life and discovered an incredible deficit in his spirit. He'd been a fool. In the words of the hymn "He was rich in things, but poor in soul." He thought that work was his ticket to freedom, fulfillment, inner contentment. Instead, his single-minded, unconditional devotion to the god of wealth left him bankrupt. Nothing short of a radical change could save him.

That revolution came in 1965 when Fuller moved to Koinonia Farm, a small community in Americus, Georgia founded for the purpose of living the words of Jesus. Tolerance, racial equality and Christian faith were the ideals of the farm. Fuller stopped serving the god of money and began serving the God of Jesus Christ. His family of six moved into a small second floor apartment on Koinonia farm. Together, Fuller and Jordan conceived of a fund. The money would come from local churches and be used to build homes and provide no interest loans for the extremely poor black farmers of Sumter County, Georgia. The Klan did not like what they were doing and tried several times to shut them down or burn them out. But from those simple beginnings, Habitat for Humanity was born.

Millard Fuller, whose vision was once to make a million dollars, changed to a vision of building a million homes with the economics of Jesus. And that vision is becoming a reality around the world and in Trenton, NJ and Morrisville, PA. In his book, *Love in the Mortar Joints*, Millard Fuller believes that if our Lord can feed the multitudes by multiplying five loaves and two fish, then he can also house the multitudes by multiplying our minute resources to accomplish the gigantic. Volunteers and future owners share the load, share the responsibility, share the credit and give glory to God.

With the power of God, Millard Fuller broke the chain of greed and brought God's abundant life to millions.