

The Faces of Greed

Matthew 26:1-16

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Who comes to mind when you hear the word “Greed?” Whose face do you see? Whose name do you hear? Do you think of Bernie Madoff, who “made off” with other people’s money through the largest Ponzi scheme in history? He became rich by defrauding his clients of an estimated \$65 billion, destroying numerous Jewish charities and institutions in the process. Or do you think of Jeffrey Skilling, once the President and then the CEO of Enron, who one year made \$132 million, and who currently is serving a 24 year sentence for fraud? When Enron filed for bankruptcy in 2001, 20,000 lost their jobs, and investors lost billions. Do you think of Gordon Gecko, the slick and sleazy trader in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, who seemed to capture the ethos of that decade with his declaration, “Greed is good?” Or how about Judas, who turned Jesus over to the authorities to be arrested for thirty pieces of silver—which was a lot of money, equivalent to perhaps two hundred thousand dollars today, proving that when greed creeps into a human soul, that someone will do almost anything for money. Or do you think of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*? After all, Dickens’ description of Scrooge is the very picture of greed: “Oh! But he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.” What a withering portrait of greed!

We need to be careful here. If we associate greed too closely with the glaring examples from the news or the portrayals found in literature or film, we will likely miss the more everyday and commonplace expressions of greed that are found closer to home and can even take up residence in our own lives. Philosopher Rebecca De Young, writes: “The greedy person’s attachment to wealth can wear many faces—an overflowing shopping cart or a single purchase, a stock portfolio that is aggressive or conservative, a wallet full of credit cards or a safety deposit box with a few carefully guarded treasures, a garage full of expensive cars or a closet jammed full of ‘great deals.’”

Of course, the faces of greed are easier to identify in the lives of others than they are in our own. Methodist Bishop and author, William Willimon, muses, “When does our need for that ever expanding ‘more’ of life become too much? When does the desire for the abundant life become the life that is jerked around by grubby Greed? I expect that you know better when *I* cross that line than when you trip over it.”

He’s right, isn’t he? One of my best friends loves cars—he’s quite obsessed with them, actually. He is from Detroit, so he comes by it naturally. He has owned quite a few sports cars, each one more exotic and expensive than the last. I would never spend that much money on a car, and I’ve probably been a bit smug about that, on occasion. So I’m really glad that he doesn’t see how often the UPS truck stops at my house with a package from Amazon.com. How often? Put it this way: I’m on a first-name basis with the UPS truck driver. Sometimes I think I could claim him as

a dependent on my income taxes.

Greed, perhaps more than the other deadly sins, has an ability to sneak up on you. British journalist and essayist, Henry Fairlie, writes:

No one accuses us of being selfish when we walk into Neiman Marcus and buy a suit or a dress that we do not need, yet a callousness begins to grow in us when our appetites are not challenged. Why should one not dress beautifully? And indeed why should one not? But then something else begins to happen: One gets tired of giving a quarter to a beggar. Or one forgets or simply does not notice. Much worse than that, one gets tired of supporting, with one's own energy and skills, the programs that might make the beggar not a beggar.

Greed is sneaky in this way, also: it is always trying to blur the line between want and need, between desire and necessity. William Willimon writes: "We really do need clothing that protects us from the cold, but we also appear really to need clothing that adorns the body and is attractive." One could worship God in a Quonset hut, but "something about us needs a beautiful space in which to praise so beautiful a God. The line between need and desire gets thin."

The line between want and need also gets blurred because a consumer culture relies on stimulating our desire. In Vermont they tell the story about a general store owner in a remote corner of the state. He's just gotten a shipment of fresh pineapples. It is the first time he has ever carried them, the first time anyone can remember having them available in that little town. One of his customers comes in and the store keeper says, "Try the fresh pineapple. It's delicious." The customer replies, "No, thank you. I don't want to develop any new hankerings." But, you see, our consumer culture is predicated on our developing "new hankerings" all of the time, and we, in turn, are often happy to do our part.

Did you know that the average American shops eighteen hours a week? That's a lot of time to develop new hankerings. And have you noticed that there are more and more stores that do not have anything you really need? Henry Fairlie put it well:

The most important fact about our shopping malls, as distinct from the ordinary shopping centers where we go for our groceries, is that we do not need most of what they sell, not even for our pleasure or entertainment.... Little in them is essential to our survival, our work, or our play.... Our appetites are stimulated so that the product will be consumed, and thus we are incited to possess for the sake of possessing. We "must have that," when we see it, even though we do not need it.

In New York there is a well known clothing store that has the motto, "An educated consumer is our best customer." But consumers are not so much educated as they are nurtured and formed. Again I turn to William Willimon:

Once, during the middle of a sermon just before the annual orgy of buying that we once called Christmas, I said, "If you bring a young child, say a child of five or six, into this church, the child will be disoriented, will need

instruction, will not know what to do next. If you take that same child into Toys ‘R’ Us, no instruction will be required.” Then I caught myself in mid-sentence and said, “No, that’s not fair to the folk at Toys ‘R’ Us, who have spent millions and utilized the best minds that we can produce to instruct this child, through a barrage of ads, that the whole purpose of life is consumption, that life consists in the abundance of their possessions.”

Willimon concludes: “None of the Seven Deadly Sins receives such extensive indoctrination in our culture as Greed. Advertising is not simply information; it is also formation.”

I have concluded that greed is a fearful response to life. In fact, I think greed is largely fueled by fear—fear of scarcity, fear that there is not enough to go around, fear of missing out, fear of having something taken from us. And greed may be an expression of other, larger fears as well.

In Tennessee Williams’ classic play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, there is the memorable character of Big Daddy. He has made a lot of money, and now he is dying of cancer. At one point he says, “The human animal is a beast that must die. If he’s got money, he buys and buys and buys everything he can, in the crazy hope one of those things will be life-everlasting, which it never can be.” Big Daddy, as he nears the end of his days, sees a number of things more clearly, including the way greed can cause a person to mispend his life. After all, a shroud has no pockets.

When greed creeps into someone’s heart, that person can become almost completely self involved. It is telling that the symbol of greed is a tight fist—holding on to things, of course, but also curling in on itself, reminding me of William Sloane Coffin’s observation that there is no package so small as a person wrapped up in himself.

And it is telling, as well, that greed does not have a happy face. So the adjectival form of the word *miser* is *miserable*. A miser is, quite literally, miserable. The greedy person is never satisfied with what he has; he always wants more. The greedy person is afraid of losing what she already has, even though worry keeps her from taking delight in her possessions. In fact, the question that hovers over a greedy person’s life is this: Do you possess your possessions, or are you possessed by them?

I appreciate what my friend Tony Robinson has said: “The only sure way to silence the voices inside your head that say, ‘Never enough, never enough’ is to give something away.” I think he’s right. But I would go even further. As surely as being a miser makes one miserable, being a giver brings joy. The Apostle Paul famously said, “God loves a cheerful giver.” But let me ask you, is there any other kind of giver? Givers *are* cheerful. I have never known any truly giving person who has not been a person of cheer. I am not referring to the kind of reluctant, count-the-cost kind of giver. Rather, I am thinking of the open-handed, open-hearted givers. They not only spread cheer and share joy, but they obviously *know* cheer and *experience* joy. We might wonder which comes first: do these people know cheer and joy because they are givers, or are they givers because they are people of cheer and joy? The question seems strangely moot, for in the lives of such people, the two are inextricably intertwined, joy and giving flow from one another in a sure and blessed way. So the opposite of greed is a gracious mixture of gratitude, generosity, and joy.

Gratitude, generosity, and joy—don’t let anyone try to sell you anything else.