

PREFACE

During Lent of 2009, Community Presbyterian Church and I took our journey through Lent by meditating on the Seven Deadly Sins. What follows in this book are the sermons that I preached that time. The fact that these were lessons taught to a congregation contributes to the fact of the conversational nature of the prose. I hope that the content of the material will be helpful enough to the reader to forgive the sins of informality or even the poor editing. (I would fire my editor, but he is the one writing the book.)

There is not much here that is original. The Seven Deadly Sins have been dealt with for quite some time throughout church history. As you will read, I relied heavily upon many authors, who themselves relied upon many authors. I appreciate my friend and co-laborer Rich Lusk, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, AL, who inspired me to begin this series (unbeknownst to him) and who helped me think through these issues of all of these sins in his own sermon series. I pray that this series will help the reader think more deeply about his sin, how to battle it, and, ultimately, focus his mind on the grace of God provided in Christ and by the Spirit to deal with sin. May the Lord grant us all the strength that we need every day to realize our sin, confess it, and correct it by the power he provides.

Advent 2013

INTRODUCTION

The Seven Deadly Sins: Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust. These seven sins have been recognized in the church for centuries as being particularly harmful. This is not to say that other sins are somehow “less deadly” or only maim. All sin is and ultimately leads to death. Sin is that inherited, willful disease that we have that makes us less than human. We were created as the image of God as individuals in relationship with one another. As images of God our purpose was to reflect the life of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, knowing ourselves and others in such a way so as to experience joy and peace. Anything less than that is unhuman. Anything less than that is death, and that is the fruit of sin ... all sin.

While all sin produces death, there are some sins that are especially egregious in their character. That which has been come to be known as the Seven Deadly Sins fits that bill. At first the list seems unimpressive. We could think of many more sins that could be listed that would be even more deadly. For example, why isn't murder or adultery on this list? Those sins are certainly deadly and obviously so. To add to this mystery is the fact that this list is not found in this way anywhere in Scripture; these sins are not found in a list like this in Exodus, Proverbs, Galatians, or another book of the Bible. All would acknowledge that these sins are dealt with in Scripture in various places, but they are not listed like this.

The first record of this list of seven is found around the time of Augustine and was put together by Evagrius of Pontus in his *Praktikos*. He was a desert monk. (*Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*, William Willimon, 18). Some believe that these seven sins are derived by inverting the Beatitudes, each sin being the opposite of the quality Jesus lists as a state of blessedness. However they came about, they do reflect the spirit of Jesus' teaching in the fact that these sins are what we might call “root” sins. These sins have a generative quality; the fruit is more obvious than the root. William Willimon, referring to Gregory the Great's formal sevenfold division of sins says that

Gregory listed the seven principle vices or “capital sins.” Gregory is clear that what makes the Seven so deadly is their generative quality. He says things like, “From envy there springs hatred, whispering, detraction, exaltation at the misfortunes of a neighbor, and affliction at his prosperity. From anger are produced strife, swelling of mind, insults, clamor, indignation, blasphemies.” These are the “capital”—that is, the “head” (Latin: *caput*)—sins, the cardinal sins, the sins that are among the most fecund of sins. Their seriousness is not so much within themselves but in their ability to generate even more serious offspring. Gregory the Great spoke of the Seven as “leaders of wicked armies.” (Willimon, 21)

These sins are like seven fountains that continue to bubble up more and greater wickedness that will run like a river if not dealt with at the source. Like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, we realize that sins that manifest themselves have deeper roots. These roots are listed in this sevenfold manner. This sevenfold manner shows us the diversity of our perversity.

As you take some time to meditate on these Seven Deadly Sins, you need not be asking questions like, “What rules do I need to obey in order to avoid these?” The question goes much deeper. We are dealing with the deepest part of our characters and how they have been contaminated by sin. This question concerns what type of people we are to become. This is not as simple as dealing with a child’s list of do’s and don’ts.

Each of these sins affects our vision. That is, each of these sins takes a certain perspective on ourselves and the world around us. This is one reason, I suppose, that many historical artist renderings of the Seven Deadly Sins have focused on the eyes. These sins infect our vision with a skewed view of reality. Reality is what God defines it to be. The only way to know and live in reality is to live by faith. We are to see through the eyes of faith, understanding God and the world around us as he defines it. Sin perverts that vision, skewing everything. Throughout the chapters that follow, I hope to show you not only how these sins distort reality, but how our vision can be cured.

So, now you are invited to come and walk through some biblical meditations on these Seven Deadly Sins. As you do, my hope is not only that will your sin be exposed and you will see your desperate need of God’s grace, but that you will also see the remedy for your sin in Christ Jesus and the hope that he provides to forgive and deliver you from your sin.

THE INGROWN EYES OF PRIDE

Read: Daniel 4.19-37; Luke 18.9-14; Philippians 2.1-11

“Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.” (C. S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian*, 164) Many throughout church history have take pride to be something of the first among equals in this list of the Seven Deadly Sins. Pride is certainly a sin and a root of sin that God hates and leads to all sorts of wickedness. Pride is one of the seven things Proverbs lists that YHWH hates. “These six things YHWH hates, yes seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look....” (Prov 6.16-19). Proverbs also tells us that pride comes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall (Prov 16.18). Pride brings people to destruction and death. Pride is deadly. Pride is the first sin committed in this world. The serpent and the man both exalted their own words above the word of the Creator. That pride led to their own death and the death that

came into the world.

Pride is sometimes quite obvious. When we see the braggadocios blow-hard who goes around extolling his own accomplishments, wanting everyone to look at him, we immediately see pride and are, many times, repulsed by it. But one of the things that makes the Seven Deadly Sins so deadly, pride being the first and foremost, is that they are not always that obvious. They are subtle. They are not the hatchet that is swinging for your head but the poison that is in your coffee. It slithers like a serpent under many different covers instead of trudging noisily like the elephant. Its subtlety does not make it less deadly but rather more deadly. Had we seen this big, deadly sin coming our way, surely we would have avoided it. But this slips up on us so stealthily that sometimes it even looks like virtue instead of vice.

Pride has been the bane of man's existence since the time of the Garden of Eden. All of us experience it. We despise to see it in others, not necessarily because we hate sin *per se*, but because we ourselves desire to be exalted above others. Once again C. S. Lewis writes:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people except Christians ever imagine that they are guilty themselves.... There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. (Quoted in Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue*, 97)

There are a number of places to which we could turn to examine the sin of pride, but I want to look at pride and its opposite in the stories of Nebuchadnezzar, the Pharisee, and Jesus himself. The comparisons and contrasts here are stark and provide us with a good picture of pride and its opposite, humility.

The Character of Pride

Self-sufficiency

Pride can be described in many ways. When they are all boiled down, pride comes down to a person being *consumed with himself* to one degree or another. The Seven Deadly Sins have, through the years, been illustrated by different depictions of human eyes. There are several ways that pride could be depicted with the eyes. You might imagine one looking down so as to see everyone as beneath him. You might also depict pride with eyes raised upwards so as to be ignoring others who are less important. Peter Kreeft depicts pride in a different way: "Pride has ingrown eyeballs." (Kreeft, 103). While humility has eyes that look outward to the condition of others, pride is consumed with ones own self.

In our biblical texts we can see at least two general ways in which this selfishness expresses itself. Pride, first, expresses itself as *self-sufficiency*. Pride believes that it needs nothing outside of itself and is not dependent upon anyone or anything ultimately. Everything that one is and accomplishes is all because of oneself.

This attitude is displayed for us in living color in the story of Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 4 Nebuchadnezzar is writing a letter to all the people, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth (Dan 4.1). He can write this letter in this way because Nebuchadnezzar is *the* king of the known world. The Babylonian Empire was the dominant empire of the time and Nebuchadnezzar

was its king. The world was his. Daniel, in interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 says about Nebuchadnezzar being the head of gold at the top of the statue: "You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of men, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all...." (Dan 2.37-38).

Nebuchadnezzar was a new Adam, a new man, into whose hand was given dominion over all the earth. Everything was his. He had no worries, no fears. He had complete security. But like the first Adam, Nebuchadnezzar began to think more highly of himself than he ought. He began to believe that all of these things had been accomplished by his own hand. It is that with which his letter in Daniel 4 is concerned.

Nebuchadnezzar had another dream. This dream was about a tree that grew up and all the birds of the heavens found rest in its branches. But then the tree was chopped down. The man whom it represented would become beast-like and would become wet with the dew of heaven. Daniel interprets the dream and tells Nebuchadnezzar that it concerns him. He will be like this unless he breaks off from his sins by practicing righteousness and showing mercy to the oppressed (Dan 4.27).

But Nebuchadnezzar didn't listen. At the end of twelve months, Nebuchadnezzar went to the roof of his palace in Babylon and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" At that time he went mad, became like a beast, eating grass like an ox and having his grow out like eagle's feathers and his nails like birds' claws.

The Pharisee in Jesus' parable exhibits the same type of pride. Luke introduces the parable thus, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt." (Lk 18.9) Trusting in yourself is the essence of pride. It is the statement that one doesn't need others, even God himself. You are self-sufficient. In this self-sufficiency a person cuts himself off from God and from others.

Self-sufficiency recognizes *no need for mercy*. If I am self-sufficient, I can go it alone. I don't need anyone's "handouts." I can pull myself by my own boot straps. I don't need anything you can do for me. Like all pride, sometimes this is blatantly obvious and sometimes it is not. There are those who are arrogantly resistant to mercy. They believe and confess loudly that if they cannot make it on their own, then they will just not make it. When they do accomplish things in life, they do not recognize or give thanks to God or others for the mercy that they have received along the way. They have done it all on their own. This is the obviously self-sufficient.

Then there is the subtle self-sufficiency that clothes itself in the sackcloth of humility but inwardly believes itself to be dressed in regal robes. I speak about the false humility that refuses to receive gifts. It is the so-called humility that says, "I am not worthy of this gift and therefore will not receive it." While portraying itself as humility what is being said is, "If I cannot earn it for myself, then I do not want it." Because it is a gift and therefore not earned, it does not reflect my worth and worthiness as I perceive them. This is the person who in refusing to receive the gift is saying, "I must earn what I receive." This is sometimes manifest in the attitude that Christians have before God concerning the forgiveness of sins. You have confessed your sin and you say, "I know God has forgiven me, but I cannot forgive myself." What abject, detestable pride! Your standard for forgiveness is higher than God's? What you are saying is that you believe that you must do something to earn God's forgiveness. Then and only then will you feel good about receiving it ... because then it won't be mercy. Pride will cut you off from the mercy of God and from others. Because pride believes it needs no mercy.

Pride also sees *no need for community*. Because Pride needs no one, it doesn't need to be in a community of mutual giving and receiving. Pride is the rugged individualist who goes it alone. There are times that this is hailed as a virtue. The prideful man says that he is a "free spirit" that can't be tied down to a community. He has the need to "express himself" in his own way without regards for the boundaries of a committed community relationship. So, he decides for himself what his freedom looks like. He puts himself in a position that he decides what is good and not good, what freedom is and what it is not. The only justification for this "freedom of expression" is his own whim. He has become his own god, cut off from the community because, after all, who needs others? In fact, the prideful man the community sets up a competition. Prideful people are always excessively competitive people. (There is a good form of competition, but an excessively competitive spirit reveals pride.) C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*, dedicates an entire chapter to Pride, what he calls, "The Great Sin." He speaks of pride as being *competitive*.

Pride is *essentially* competitive—is competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest... Other vices may sometimes bring people together: you may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken people or unchaste people. But Pride always means enmity—it *is* enmity. And not only enmity between man and man but enmity to God." (quoted in *The Joyful Christian*, 164-5)

Pride feels threatened by others' knowledge and/or abilities. It cannot stand to be outdone and, so, it presses always to be better than others or to be around others who are less than itself. Pride is always comparing my accomplishments, my knowledge, my abilities to others. I must be better than them. If I am not, then I must bring them down so that I can be or I must separate myself from them

It is in this state that pride does not only *lead to* punishment but pride in itself is the beginning of and is essentially *is* its own punishment. Created in the image a God who eternally and humbly lives in perfect union within a community, we are created to be humble. Inasmuch as pride in itself cuts us off from community it makes us less than human; for to be human is to reflect the image of the God who created us. So, it could be said that the prideful man lives in his own seed-form of hell. He is beginning to understand what the flames of torment will be like: complete and utter loneliness, cut off from all communion with others, consumed with your own self. Nebuchadnezzar's story gives a vivid picture of this when he becomes like a "beast" and is cut off from men. Nebuchadnezzar grasped to become more than human—his own god—and he became less than human. So it is with all prideful people.

Self-exaltation

Pride is revealed in our belief that we are self-sufficient. But self-sufficiency has a hideous twin sister: *self-exaltation*. These two sisters are joined at the hip from the very

conception of pride. Because we are self-sufficient, we believe that we have risen above and look down on others. Nebuchadnezzar spoke about all that he had built for his mighty power and for the honor of his majesty (Dan 4.30). The Pharisee's prayer is shot-through with all that he has accomplished. Jesus' conclusion about the Pharisee in Luke 18.14 (as he gives the general principle) is that the Pharisee has exalted himself. The opening words of the parable are interesting, especially as you read them in the NKJV, "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself." (Lk 18.11) He is praying "with himself." That is really the concern here: self-exaltation.

Pride is focused upon oneself. Once again, "Pride has ingrown eyeballs." (Kreeft, 103). This goes beyond being myopic or short-sighted. Pride is not short-sighted, it self-only-sighted. It can't even see outside of itself at a short distance. The first and greatest commandment of pride is "love yourself with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" (cf. Kreeft, 97). There is no need for a second commandment. The prideful man thinks too often of himself and too much of himself. The prideful person thinks too highly of himself and too frequently of himself (Rich Lusk, Sermon on Pride).

This self-exaltation takes many forms as well; some obvious, and some not so obvious. As I have mentioned, the braggart who goes around boasting of how great he is is obvious. But that is not generally our problem. Pride is being consumed with self. This may even express itself in being consumed with one's own sins all of the time. When this happens and you become depressed about it ... and you will ... you are paralyzed from serving others. Being consumed with your sin in this inordinate way is manifesting the attitude that you shouldn't have to be wrestling with sin like this. You are above this. You can't figure out why you are still in this state. It comes across as humility, but it is pride. It is a pride that keeps you focused on yourself so that you will not serve others the way that you should.

It even becomes more hideous when you begin to look-down on others as "not taking sin as seriously as you" because they don't wallow in it all the time. So, even in your debasement, you are exalting yourself above others, showing contempt for them. Those are the people at whom Luke says Jesus is aiming: they trust in themselves and show contempt for others. Not showing mercy to others is pride. When admonishing Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel told him that he would need to "break off ... his iniquity *by showing mercy to the oppressed/poor*" (Dan 4.27). Prideful people exalt themselves above others and do not extend mercy to them, forgetting their obligations to others. As with their self-sufficiency, their self-exaltation cuts them off from the community and they don't see their obligations to others. "*Those people,*" repentant or not, are untouchables. If I go descend to speak with and fellowship with them, I might be tainted. That is pride.

The prideful person has risen above all others. In this exaltation, the prideful person also *does not recognize human limitations*. For the prideful person, the "rules" don't apply to him. He has broken free from the normal constraints of humanity and believes himself to have or have the possibility of superceding normal human limitations. Even though God is mindful that we are but dust and have limitations (Psa 103), and even though God has made it clear that we cannot shepherd the wind (Eccl), the prideful man has no regard for these words and their corresponding limitations.

This happens in the Christian world as much as anywhere else. We believe that because we are doing something that is good that we can ignore the limitations and call it "faith." We can work ourselves to death and call it "ministry." No one can question us, and God help them if they do. They will be made to feel like they are unspiritual low-lives. We have risen above the

restraints of humanity and live in another realm. Christians as much as non-Christians (and sometimes more than non-Christians) believe we ought to be able to know everything about subject and be able to do everything that there is to do.

What pride refuses to see is that this is a denial of my part within the community and the mission of the community as a whole working together. In this attitude you will destroy yourself *and* the community (if it is allowed to persist). Pride clothes itself in the robes of righteousness. Whenever we balk to say, “I don’t know” or “No, I can’t do that,” we are expressing pride. When we recoil when someone tells us these things, our expectations of them being to do what we want them to do and know what we want them to know, we are expressing pride. When pride does grasp some knowledge about something (and pride always believes it knows something) or gains the ability to do something (and pride always believes it can do something), it will then use that knowledge or ability to make others feel small.

This is seen in young children as well as adults. Young children will belittle others for not knowing these facts from their school work, who the latest and greatest pop star is, what is going on in the sports world, or the fact that they are able to do something or have something that another child does not. Children must be taught to recognize and guard against pride.

Pride is not merely the sin of youth. Proudful children age and sometimes do not mature in these areas. They must always keep up with the neighbors whether in toys, abilities, or knowledge. Pride must know more, have more, and do more than the guy next to it. This can be seen in something seemingly as trivial as a conversation in which you must interrupt people because what you have to say is much more important than what this idiot talking to you has to say. Pride makes people feel small. But the packaging of pride makes it more acceptable to us. Sometimes, especially as Christians, our pride is packaged in “good doctrine.”

Consider the Pharisee in Lk 18. He begins by thanking God. That seems to be a recognition of God’s grace. He’s only recognizing, so it would seem, that God has graced him more than this poor slub beside him. He has used the context of prayer to boast of his accomplishments and draw attention to himself thereby exalting himself. William Willimon relates a story about some Jews in a synagogue that illustrates the point perfectly.

Two old men sitting in their synagogue during the Sabbath service overhear the loud lament of another worshiper near them: “God, be merciful to me, a nobody! God, forgive me, a nobody! God, help me, though I am a nobody!”

One of the men looks at the other and asks, “Who’s this who thinks he’s such a nobody?” Even in our honest confession of our sin, there can be the whiff of Pride.” (Willimon, 44)

We are proud of the fact that we know the doctrine of man’s total depravity and that we are saved solely by grace through faith. And, if you disagree with me about this, I will drive you into the ground to prove that *I* am right and *you* are wrong! We thank God that we do not worship like those “other Christians.” While it is not absolutely wrong to point out deficiencies (we are instructed to do so throughout Scripture), it is quite possible to pit ourselves against other Christians and say, “We thank you God that we are not like.... We use ancient liturgical forms.”

Pride is insidious and will slink its way through our hearts and minds declaring its self-sufficiency and exalting itself above all others. Pride ultimately takes credit to yourself for what you have received. Tim Keller says that it is “cosmic plagiarism.” Taking what belongs to God and acting as if you deserve all the credit for it. But Paul says “What do you have that you have not received, and if you have received it, then why do you boast as if you have not received it?”

(1Cor 4.7). Ultimately, everything we are and have we have received from the hand of God. If we have received it, then we have no reason to boast in ourselves. Instead, we are to be humble. To understand humility, we turn to its literal embodiment: our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Cure for Pride

Dependence

Corresponding to two incarnations of pride, humility recognizes its *dependence* and is *self-abasing*. Humility recognizes the need for God and others and is willing to depend upon both, renouncing self-sufficiency for the crime that it is against God and the community. The tax collector in Jesus' parable won't even look up but pounds his chest and says, "God have mercy upon me a sinner." This is a man who is humble. He recognizes his need for gifts, for mercy, and he is willing to receive it. He is not trying earn it. He is throwing himself upon the mercy of God and saying, "If you don't have mercy upon me then I am destroyed. I have no resources in myself. I am completely dependent upon you."

Jesus, in our passage in Philippians, is completely dependent upon the word of the Father. This is exhibited in the fact that he "humbles himself and becomes obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." He trusts that the Father will do what he says he will do. That is humility. Humility confesses its need for God and for others. Humility realizes that we are not sufficient in ourselves.

Self-abasing

Humility is recognizes its dependence upon God and others, but humility is also *self-abasing*. When I say that humility is self-abasing, I am **not** saying that humility is *self-deprecating*; thinking and/or talking bad about oneself. Many times that is just another form of pride. You see the self-deprecating person is still focused upon himself indicated by the fact that he is talking about himself. (Remember the Jews? "Who's that guy who thinks he's a nobody?") "Humility is thinking less *about* yourself, not thinking less *of* yourself," says Peter Kreeft. Humility is not going around saying, "I am a worm, a nobody, a nothing." Humility is not concerned so much about what *I* am but what *you* need. When Jesus humbles himself, he does so for the sake of serving others. This is the mind or mindset that we are to have as Christians Paul says in Philippians 2. We are to act like Jesus. We are to think more about the needs of others than our own.

This provides the antidote to pride that must be administered daily throughout our lives: we must look at a mimic the humility of Jesus our Lord. Slowly throughout life we will be recognize and be able to deal with the ever-flowing spring of pride that is constantly welling up in our souls. Humbling ourselves in this way will lead to true exaltation. Consider our Scriptural characters. Once Nebuchadnezzar is humiliated for a while, God raises him up. It is at that time he writes this letter and gives praise to the God of heaven upon whom he is dependent for all things. God gives him the kingdom. The tax collector humbly approaches God and he, not the Pharisee, goes home vindicated or justified. Jesus himself humbles himself and becomes obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, and it is for this reason that God the Father exalts him to be the Lord of all (Phil 2.9-11). As Jesus says in Lk 18.14: "... everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." The apostle Peter tells us

the same thing when he says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.” (1Pt 5.6) God is not against us being exalted. He promises to exalt us. Pride tries to take the short-cut. Humility is the long road, but it is the sure road to proper, lasting exaltation.

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, Father, Son, and Spirit, grant me eyes to see my pride as you see my pride. By your Spirit, aid me in humbling myself before you in serving others, following the example of my Lord Jesus Christ, who is my only hope and through whom I pray. *Amen.*

THE WANDERING EYES OF ENVY

Read: 1Samuel 18.1-16; Matthew 27.15-23; James 3.13-18

How happy are you with your life? How satisfied are you? Are you content? Are you at peace about your present conditions? We are a blessed people in this country; the envy of many in the world. Much of the rest of the world looks at our nation and would love to have the wealth that we enjoy. Many people leave their homelands to come and be a part of this nation to have their chance at prosperity. Yet, many times, we in this country don't understand ourselves to be wealthy. While the whole world is looking at us, we are looking at one another, comparing ourselves to our neighbors. In the comparison we find ourselves not being satisfied with what we have because someone else has more. Why can't we be happy with what we have? Why can't we be satisfied, content, and have peace? The problem does not lie in what we have or don't have. The problem must be in our hearts. The problem is envy.

Many have exalted pride to be the king of all sins. As I have heard it said, if pride is the king of the Seven Deadly sins, envy is its prince. Pride and envy being in the same family bear much family resemblance. Though they are distinguished, they can never be separated. Having read the chapter concerning pride, you might see that some of the characteristics of envy may sound quite familiar.

The Character of Envy

Jealousy: The virtuous host of envy

No sin is cut from whole cloth. Sin perverts righteous character. When we hear “perversion,” we may think of something particularly heinous. I am not speaking about the ugliness that we see necessarily. I am speaking about how sin comes about. Sin is the twisting of something that is good and righteous. Sin has no being on its own. It does not exist along side good as a separate entity. Sin is a parasite that attaches itself to a righteous host and sucks all of the life out of it, causing it to be distorted and twisted. As Peter Kreeft says in his book *Back To Virtue*, “All evil counterfeits good; Hell has a very limited imagination.” (121)

Envy is no different from any other sin in this respect. But what is that righteous host to which it attaches itself? Well, we can certainly understand that envy is the distortion of love, the chief of all virtues. Paul tells us in 1Corinthians 13 that love does not envy. So, envy is the distortion of love. But that could be said about any sin because all sins are somehow a distortion of love. There is a particular aspect of love that is closer and which envy distorts: jealousy.

In the Scriptures, jealousy is a righteous quality. In fact, in the Second Word (or “Commandment”) God says that we are not create and bow down to graven images because he is a *jealous* God. (Ex 20.4-5) Then, later on in Exodus God says that his name is Jealous. There again he is proclaiming his exclusivity as Israel’s God. They are to worship no other god because YHWH, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. (Ex 34.14) God even prescribes a jealousy test for husbands who suspect infidelity in their wives. This test ultimately reflected YHWH’s own relationship with Israel, his bride. (Cf. Num 5)

Righteous jealousy zealously protects that which rightfully belongs to me. Jealousy guards with vigilance the exclusivity and, thus, purity of a relationship. Jealousy is perverted when it becomes envy. What is tricky about this in the Scriptures is that some of the same words are used in Hebrew and in Greek to translate the righteous quality of jealousy and its perversion envy. The context is the only thing that can tell you with which one you are dealing. While biblical, God-imaging jealousy zealously guards what rightfully belongs to us, envy inverts that focus to what rightfully belongs to others and wants it for itself. Jealousy fires us with passion to protect what is our own. Envy fires us with passion to do whatever it takes to get what belongs to another and deprive him of it. God is always jealous, but God is never envious. Envy is the perversion of righteous jealousy.

Envy is not biblical jealousy. While I’m talking about what Envy is not, let me also say that Envy is not righteous *aspiration* or *ambition*. Certainly those things can be twisted and perverted, but they can also be righteous qualities. It is good to aspire and be ambitious to greatness in a field, productiveness, and even to aspire to a particular position. Paul told Timothy that if a man desires or aspires to be a bishop, he aspires to a good thing (1Tim 3.1). It is also good to look up to someone or aspire to be like someone. Paul tells people on certain occasions to follow his example as he follows Christ. Wanting to be like a godly person is a good aspiration. Kept within its bounds, aspiration and ambition drive us on to maturity and many other good things. The problem with sin—and particularly envy—is that it makes us go outside the safety of those righteous boundaries.

The side-glancing eyes of envy

The eyes of envy are constantly looking over the fence; those righteous boundaries. It is in the looking over this fence that what is righteous becomes unrighteous; it is the place where righteous jealousy, aspiration, and ambition become the green monster of envy. Historically when envy has been portrayed in art, the focus has been on the eyes. Envy always has a side-ways glance peering through slit-eyes. Envy is always looking at its neighbor and measuring itself by what it sees. Interestingly, this is how we see envy in 1Samuel 18.

You might recall what has just happened in 1Samuel 17. The Philistines challenged Israel to a battle of champions. They sent out the giant Goliath of Gath. But all of the men of Israel, including Saul himself, were afraid to go out and fight him. God’s people, especially God’s leaders and kings, were supposed to be giant killers. Refusing to face giants cost Israel thirty-eight more years in the wilderness. God’s people were supposed to be giant killers. But Saul, the king of Israel, was acting like unbelieving Israel of old and failed to fulfill his responsibility.

David, the young shepherd and brother of some of the warriors in Israel, came and saw what was going on, and heard the blasphemous challenges that were being hurled by this uncircumcised Philistine. David took up the challenge and became the champion of Israel. He went out and defeated the giant like a faithful Israelite.

When the armies came back from the defeat of the Philistines, the ladies greeted them with a song: “Saul has slain his thousands / And David his ten thousands.” We have been so accustomed to seeing Saul’s response to this, that we fail to see that this was actually a compliment to Saul. This type of poetic construction is used in ancient literature to intensify and express the greatness of something. For example, in Psalm 91.7 we read/sing “A thousand may fall at your side / ten thousand at your right hand.” This is an intensification of the greatness of our victory. The song should have been understood something like this, “Saul and David have slain a great many of the enemy!” (McCarter, *Anchor*, 1Samuel, *ad loc.*)

As we know, Saul does not take this as a complement. Instead, he responds by feeling inferior to David and setting him up as a rival. In 1Samuel 18.9 the Bible says literally, “And Saul eyed David from that day on.” The understanding is that he looked at David with envy. Our word “envy” comes ultimately from a Latin root that means “to look askance at” (*invidere*). It is eying our neighbor through slit-eyes.

In this that we see the relationship between pride and envy. I mentioned in the chapter on pride that pride is always looking at itself. Well, envy is pride that has looked away from self just long enough to despise the good of others. Envy looks at its neighbor and all that he has and wants it. But more than that, envy despises the fact that its neighbor has it and seeks to deprive him of it in some way; and those ways are as varied and insidious as the sin itself. Thomas Aquinas said that Envy is “sorrow at another’s good.” Another ancient, Evagrius, calls Envy “sadness.” Envy is miserable and mourning because someone else is better than it or has more than it possesses. “Aspiration,” Kreeft says, “looks up and says, ‘I aspire to be up there too.’ ... Envy on the other hand, looks up and says, ‘I want you to be below me.’ Envy is essentially competitive.” (122)

In the Scripture readings, we see the character and deadly fruit of envy. One attribute of the personality of envy is that it has *a sense of inferiority*. We see this in the relationship of Saul with David. If we did not believe someone to be greater than us or have more than us, why would we bother to envy at all? Saul heard the compliment of his participating in the slaying of great host as David’s being attributed more than he was. He took this as David having more honor. Furthermore, he believed the ladies in their song were belittling him. Of course, it wasn’t meant this way, but it revealed something about Saul and the way he viewed himself in relation to David. Saul knows that he hasn’t done what he was supposed to have done. David has come along and done what was right. Instead, of recognizing his own sin, repenting of it, and rejoicing in the victory that God brought Israel through David’s hand, Saul stewes in his sense of inferiority. That is not the way things are supposed to be. Saul is the king after all. He is supposed to be superior.

We see the same basic characteristic in the leaders of Israel who pushed for Jesus to be crucified. Even the Roman governor, Pilate, recognized that they had delivered him over “because of envy” (Mt 27.18). Jesus was recognized as having authority that was much superior to the leaders of Israel. The people recognized this when they were astonished at his teaching because he taught as one having authority and not as the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 7.29). The inferiority was real, but they didn’t like the world turned that way.

Envy is always looking with suspicion at the greatness of someone else while at the same time believing that another person’s greatness means that I am menial, diminutive, relatively nothing. Envy hates other people for having good qualities, good things, a good life, or a good anything. It grieves over them having it all the while saying, “I’m just as good as you.” But, “as C. S. Lewis points out, no one who ever said that believed it. It is the word of the one who feels

inferior and resents it.” (Kreeft, 124)

Generally, this inferiority is not felt by someone who is far off; whether in distance, ability, or possessions. We envy people who are closest to us in all of these things. Os Guinness perceptively observes that “envy is a vice of proximity. We are always prone to envy people close to us in temperament, gifts, or position. Thus mothers are more likely to envy other mothers, writers other writers, lawyers other lawyers, politicians other politicians, golfers other golfers, ministers other ministers, and so on.” There are some people we know that we will never be like. We will never live in Buckingham Palace and have all the amenities of royalty at our finger tips. Envy’s eyes do not glance that far. They are generally more on people closest to us. All of us in this group here—at work, in the neighborhood, in the church(!)—we all know we won’t be like that other group. But each one of us in this group needs to be better than our neighbor and we need to prove it.

One of the besetting and eternal problems with envy is that it is never satisfied. There will always be someone greater, someone more talented, someone who has more stuff. Even if we get to the top of the heap in our group, we then enter another group where it starts all over. We begin to earn more money than others in our neighborhood. We feel superior to them, but we are still inferior to those people who live in that exclusive neighborhood or that posh apartment flat. We have entered into another group and our eyes are still glancing at our neighbors.

We are always confronted with the dilemma of how to view our situation. Our situations will always be the view of a glass that is either half-empty or half-full. From one perspective we will never be filled up; that is, having everything. We can either respond with gratitude for what we have, or respond with ingratitude, resentment, and bitterness that we can’t have everything. My neighbor’s glass is always fuller than mine!

Because Envy views the world through these slit-eyes, envy can never be satisfied. Henry Fairlie notes, “...there is no gratification for Envy, nothing it can ever enjoy. Its appetite never ceases, yet its only satisfaction is endless self-torment.” (Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, 61) Envy sees but it is blinded; blinded to the reality of the way God created and sustains things; the way God gifts different people with differing gifts. Envy refuses to see this and, thus, sets up impossible standards for itself and then experiences everlasting frustration.

You can see it on something as (relatively) frivolous as *American Idol*. Have you ever watched those auditions? Some of these people aspire to be singers, but there is one problem: they cannot sing. But they refuse to see this and are frustrated after being turned down over and over again. Envy will not let people like this rest. It drives them on and torments their minds because they believe that they are just as good as the next guy.

Envy is torturous. It gives you no rest. There is no real pleasure in envy; that is, unless self-torment is considered pleasure. Fairlie gives an interesting description of this when he writes, “The other sins have been celebrated, however perversely, in popular song down the ages, but Envy has no song. It does not sing; it cannot bear to look, except through its slit eyes; it is unable to love, because it is riddled with fear. This gnawing fear that, if someone else gains something, it must be losing something, that someone else’s good, material or spiritual, must mean its own lessening, runs through ourselves and our societies today.”

Envy gnaws on you from the inside, destroying you. Proverbs 14.30 says that “a sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones.” It is a malignant cancer in your bones that is working destruction in you. Envy is characterized by this overwhelming sense of inferiority, seeing your neighbors as always being superior to you. And it resents it.

This sense of inferiority spawns hideous offspring. That offspring *sets up rivalries*. In

James 3 we see envy and selfish ambition paired together. This selfish ambition sets up rivalries within your relationships. The game is on, and I am planning on winning no matter what I must do to you or anyone else. These rivalries are seen in all of their ugly vividness in the story of Saul and the leaders of Israel. When Saul believed that he was being belittled and he begrudged David of his victory over the Philistine, from that point forward his envy sought to destroy David. At that point David became a rival. Envy tolerates no rivals, even though it cannot exist without them. It must always have a rival, and it must always be seeking to put down its rivals, asserting its perceived superiority.

The leaders of Israel did the very same thing with Jesus, the new and greater David. Saul sought to kill David but didn't succeed. The leaders of Israel handed Jesus over because of envy and eventually had him killed. Murder of one form or another is always the goal of Envy. In Romans 1.29 and Galatians 5.21 Paul puts envy and murder right beside one another in his catalogue of sins. He does so for good reason. Envy seeks the destruction of others.

Of course, we Christians are beyond this, right? Not really. No, we are not out physically taking the lives of others. For that reason, and that reason alone, we may think that envy is not really a big problem with us. But we murder in other ways. The response of envy to the goodness seen in someone else is to pull the other person down. The goodness in others is seen as a challenge to us, not something to be aspired to. It is only the revelation of our lack. The answer for Envy in this situation: bring the other person down. That is what must be done. My neighbor does not deserve what he has as much as I deserve it. Somehow I need to gain this and along the way deprive him of it. And this can be done in thought, word, and deed.

When Envy sees someone else greater, it begins to manifest itself in bringing others down in our minds. Envy begins to think that the other person is not really that good or that he has ulterior motives or he simply lucked out. Once again Fairlie his helpful in his comments:

We even envy someone who is good! We will not believe that they are good, or that they are as good as they seem or that they are good for the right reasons. If they are not simply hypocritical, there must be an ulterior motive, or some psychological complex. The good man must be bad inside. The good marriage must be subject to strains that are hidden from us. The good worker must be psychologically submissive. The good shepherd must have transferred his capacity to love human beings to his sheep. Goodness is painted as bad. (Fairlie, 79)

We will think, "He got that promotion because he played up to the boss." You see, it can't be because he was more qualified than me! "She is a better mother because she's got it easy." "He's a better father because he doesn't have to work like I do." "He just got lucky because he is certainly not better than me." All the sentiments of envy.

While Envy may be stopped in its tracks in the world of thought, if it is not, it will proceed to our words. Envy, in order to bring others down, will belittle others to make sure that they are below us. Envy comes across as being overly critical. No one around me can do anything right ... because they don't do it like me, and I always do things right. Envy cannot be satisfied ever with anything anyone does or any situation in life. Envy says, "Yes you did this, but you could have done it better if ..." This is not said by envy in a constructive way to make the other person better, but it is to belittle the other person and show its superiority. If you look under the surface of hyper-critical people, you will generally find envy. Everyone is a rival and everything that person does he does to show my deficiencies. Words can be used to bring them down.

Thoughts grow into words and words grow into deeds. Envious deeds are those things that we do in order to deprive someone else of goodness. I read a quote from a vandal that illustrates this: “I couldn’t afford to own an automobile ... and I didn’t want anyone else to have one.” (Guinness, 77) Envy reveals itself in situations like borrowing others’ property, damaging it and not giving proper restitution. “I don’t have it. You shared it with me, but I ought to have had it in the first place. You didn’t deserve it. So, if I destroy it, I don’t need to pay you back because you didn’t deserve it in the first place. It should have been mine.” Of course, as we see in our narratives from Scripture, attempting and carrying out murder itself can be the ultimate deed of envy.

The societal structures of envy

Some people want to cure the problem of envy within relationships by changing societal structures. Believing that envy is primarily an “environmental problem,” they seek to change people’s surroundings. The thinking goes something like this, “If we make everyone equal, there will be no need for envy,” or “If we give everyone the same opportunities, then there will be no reason to envy. You will have the opportunity to be like everyone else.” Consequently, we have people who believe that either socialism, which is a form of egalitarianism, or capitalism, which is a merit-based system, is the answer. Egalitarianism says that we must give everyone equal amounts. There must not be superiors and inferiors because that produces envy. Victor Hugo says that the political word for envy is “equality;” that is, equality meaning everybody is exactly the same. The problem is that the world is filled with different people with differing talents and abilities. Egalitarians want to change that. But that, in itself, is a revelation of their own envy. When you cannot achieve, you must change the rules. Fairlie calls this “The Revenge of Failure.” He goes on to say,

This is what Envy has done for us. If we cannot paint well, we will destroy the canons of painting and pass ourselves off as painters. If we will not take the trouble to write poetry, we will destroy the rule of prosody and pass ourselves off as poets. If we are not inclined to the rigors of an academic discipline, we will destroy the standards of that discipline and pass ourselves off as graduates. If we cannot or will not read, we will say that “linear thought” is now irrelevant and so dispense with reading. If we cannot make music, we will simply make a noise and persuade others that it is music. If we can do nothing at all, why! we will strum a guitar all day, and call it self-expression. As long as no talent is required, no apprenticeship to a skill, everyone can do it, and we are all magically made equal. Envy has at least momentarily been appeased, and failure has had its revenge. (Fairlie, 63)

The fact is that there will always be these types of inequalities, and they are not bad. No matter what the marketing world tells you, you can’t be exactly like Mike. Our governments continue to try nevertheless through graduated income tax and redistribution of wealth; also known as “economic stimulus plans” that bail out irresponsible people because everybody deserves the same things whether or not they have been responsible.

The answer to this, some say, is good capitalism. While the principles of capitalism are good, capitalism in itself is not the answer to envy. It can be a breeding ground for envy just as much as socialism. It fosters the belief that I can be like other people. But the reality is that I

cannot.

These structures are not the cure. As Joseph Epstein puts it, “Under capitalism, man envies man; under socialism, vice versa.” (Willimon, 63) Particular structures are not the problem *nor* are they the solution. The problem lies deep within the human heart where that green monster of envy is hiding. Ultimately, our envy is directed toward God himself. Willimon is helpful again here when he writes:

... [T]o Envy our neighbor’s goods is to not only despise ourselves but also to despise God. To regard our lives as diminished, in comparison with our neighbor’s life, is to despise the God who gave us our lives as they are. It is to say that God made a mistake in making us as we are, in giving us the gifts that we have been given, and by implications, in making our neighbor and giving our neighbor the gifts that have been given.
(Willimon, 64)

Envy may be glancing at our neighbor, but behind that image of God we see God himself withholding from us what we believe our due is and exalting the wrong person.

The Cure For Envy

So, what is the cure for this gangrene of the soul? There is a cure, but it isn’t quick. In fact, we will battle this green-eyed monster for the rest of our days. The medicine that brings about the cure must be administered daily, and you can never get off of it.

The simple yet profound answer to the slaying of the monster of envy is *gratitude*. Gratitude produces contentment which cuts off the blood flow to envy. You must have gratitude *for how God made you*. This doesn’t mean that you should not try or cannot improve yourself. Indeed, we are called to do so as we are called to mature in the faith. But there are some things with which we must be content. God has made us less attractive than we would like to be. He has given us the wrong body build. I don’t have a good singing voice. I can’t put my elbow in my ear. Whatever it is with which we become discontent, we are saying that God has somehow messed up. God has made you who you are for a reason. Instead of seeing those areas you dislike as deficiencies and always feeling a sense of inferiority and rivalry with others, give thanks to God for how he has made you.

You must also have *gratitude for where God has placed you*. Envy manifests itself in grumbling and complaining about the present or the past situations of my life. Nothing has ever been right. I have never been as good as that person. I have always played second fiddle. I have never had it like my brother, sister, friend, *et al*. When we start speaking like this we are revealing our ingratitude to God. Again, we can aspire to improve, but we cannot live a life of regret of what God didn’t give us when we were growing up, or what he hasn’t given us now.

Some of you reading this who have come to a better understanding of many things in the Christian faith and aspire to teach your children these wonderful things sometimes regret, I’m sure, that you didn’t have those same things when we were growing up. “Why wasn’t I taught this? Why did I have to go through all of these things?” I really can’t answer those questions in detail. But I can say that God has made you the person you are today through all of those things.

We should never look back and say, “I really deserved better.” That is an ungrateful attitude. Certainly there are some things in our past that we may wish had been different, but stewing over

them and resenting God for them is sinful. Be grateful. God has brought you through all of those things.

You also need to have *gratitude for what God has given you*. Stop comparing your life to others and what they have. Be thankful, truly thankful to God for what he has given you. Stop glancing at your neighbor. As Paul says, if you have food and clothing, be content. Be content with what you have. That does not stifle productivity, but it puts it within its righteous fences.

Last, you also need to have *gratitude for your relationship with others*. Instead of looking at others and always feeling inferior and setting up rivalries, celebrate and learn to benefit from others' superiority. Recognize that they are superior in some ways to you, give thanks to God for it, and learn from them. There will always be people superior to you in many areas. God has gifted us all differently. Give thanks for it. That gratitude will keep the sword in the heart of envy. Envy is a murderous creature. Learn to give thanks and keep it at bay.

Prayer: Most gracious and merciful God, grant me a heart of gratitude.

THE FIERY EYES OF ANGER

Read: Genesis 4.1-8; Mark 3.1-6; James 1.19-21

We've all been there at one time or another and to one degree or another in our lives. It is that burst of feeling that you get when someone cuts you off in traffic. It is that sensation you have when you are rejected for a job, by a person of the opposite sex, or by the team for which you wanted to play. It is that almost instinctive reaction you experience when your friend, your sibling, or your spouse says something to you that you believed was undeserved (even if it was true). It is that ignition that sets the toddler into convulsions of crying, writhing, and screaming when he hears that most dreaded word, "No!" You begin to feel your heart beat faster, your neck and face begin to burn as your blood pressure rises, and you become so intensely focused upon a certain object that you begin to lose perspective on anything else around you. Your insides are churning, your mind is racing, and you are stewing over the best way to get back at this other person. You feel as if you are about to explode. You are angry.

Anger is a powerful emotion, and, if not grounded in proper motives, directed toward righteous ends, and handled in a righteous way will bear deadly fruit. As we will see, anger can be a righteous quality. But the sin that dwells in us perverts righteous anger into unrighteous anger causing it to be a deadly sin, not only for ourselves but for those around us. This sinful anger, like its six siblings in the list of Seven Deadly Sins, is a seed that generates a rotten tree that produces poisonous fruit. Like the others also, it bears great resemblance to the rest of the family, feeding off of the others and bringing them to their hideous expressions. Anger is pride that has been injured. Anger is envy that has homed in on an object and reacts to the deficiencies revealed. All seven work together in an unholy unity.

The Character of Anger

Righteous Anger: The virtuous host

As mentioned when dealing with envy, sin does not have any being or life of its own. Sin is a parasite that feeds off of and sucks the life out of something virtuous, leaving some righteous

quality twisted, distorted, and perverted. Think about this with regard to the sins that we have already studied. Pride is a perversion of true self-worth given to us because we are made in the image of God. We may have righteous self-confidence and boast in Christ, but that is not sinful pride. Sinful pride believes thinks too highly of oneself and too often of oneself believing that all that I have and am has been accomplished by me and me alone. Self-worth is found in self alone. Boasting is done, not in Christ, but in ones own accomplishments.

Envy is a perversion of biblical jealousy. Righteous jealousy zealously guards the purity of a relationship, warding off anything or anyone that would threaten the beloved. While virtuous jealousy guards what rightfully belongs to me, Envy focuses upon what rightfully belongs to others, seeks to have it for its own, and deprive the other of what he has.

Sinful anger is no different in this regard. It is a perversion. It is a perversion of righteous anger. In Scripture anger does not normally have the adjective “righteous” or “unrighteous” attached to it. The context must tell you whether or not anger is the virtue or the vice. But we know that anger is most certainly virtuous because God himself is angry. In fact, Psalm 7.11 says that God is angry with the wicked every day. And there are numerous other places that speak about God’s anger or his wrath. Because God does not sin and indeed cannot sin, we know that anger is a righteous quality.

Jesus reveals the anger of God for us in Mark 3.1-6. Jesus is confronted with a situation in which a man comes to him for healing for his withered hand. The issue is whether or not he will heal him on the Sabbath. The Pharisees are watching to see if he will, because if he does he will violate their manmade traditions. Jesus asks them if it is lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill. They did not answer. At that point, Mark tells us that Jesus looks at them *with anger* because of the hardness of their hearts. They refuse to see God’s purpose for the Sabbath and have added burdensome regulations so that it is, for all intents and purposes, a day of death instead of life. Jesus is angry because they refuse to believe. They refuse to understand the life-giving purpose of the Sabbath. This causes him to be angry with them. But he is, as we know, righteously indignant. He is angry and sins not (as Ps 4.4 commands us to be; cf. also Eph 4.26).

In order to understand how one can be righteously angry, we need to understand what anger is and how it works.¹ Anger is the outworking of love. We become angry when that which we love becomes threatened. As Tim Keller notes, “Our angers reveal our loves.” Anger is not pitted against love but is the expression of it. God is angry when his creation, which he loves, is threatened by sin’s distortion and death. Because of this he is angry with sin and sinners who seek to destroy it. We, if we truly love God, become angry in the same way. In this we can be, as Paul exhorts us in Ephesians (relying on Ps 4), “angry and sin not.”

There are times when lack of anger is a sinful disposition. John Chrysostom, a relatively early church father, correctly notes that “He who is not angry when he has cause to be, sins. For unreasonable patience is the hotbed of many vices.” (Kreeft, 134) When that which is good, right, and just is threatened by the perversion of sin, it ought to make us angry. “Righteous anger,” says Lusk, “rises to the occasion to defend what is good and fight what is evil.”

We see the characteristics of righteous anger in this story of Jesus in Mark 3. There we learn *righteous anger is angry for the right reasons*. Jesus was angry *because* he loved his Father, the Law, and the people, not because he was absorbed with his own sense of self-

¹I am drawing from some great insights here and throughout this chapter given to me by Rich Lusk through personal correspondence and his sermon on anger.

importance. Righteous anger, like righteous jealousy, guards zealously that which is right, and it does so passionately.

Righteous anger also has *the right goal*. Righteous anger is directed the right way. It is ultimately constructive and life-giving. We see this in the story with Jesus; especially as it stands in contrast to the Pharisees. Jesus became angry with the Pharisees and he healed the man. He gave life on the Sabbath. You might say that his anger led him to give life. In his anger Jesus untangles the distortions left by sin. The Pharisees, upon seeing this, go off to conspire with the Herodians, their political enemies, to plot as to how they might destroy Jesus. They seek to destroy.

The Roots of Unrighteous Anger

Unfortunately in our church culture today, all anger seems to fall under the category of “unrighteous.” If anyone becomes angry with sin, he is seen as not being loving. He is arrogant. He is unmerciful. But the church today needs some righteous anger. When we see the atrocities of abortion, the wickedness of our government, and the lack of justice in our courts, we should be angry. When we see the shameless huckstering in the name of Christ, the pure silliness that goes on in the church, the lack of corrective discipline in the church, the church of Jesus Christ catering to the selfishness of people, and the factions caused by political maneuvering and animus, we ought to be infuriated. The church needs more anger.

You must know that as images of God we will experience anger. We will always have the reaction of anger to something at some time. The question is whether our anger serves the one, true, and living God or an idol. Here is a test to help you understand if your anger is righteous: If you can control your anger and direct it toward something constructive and purposeful, then it is most likely righteous. If you cannot control it and it is destructive, then we are probably entering into unrighteous anger.

Unfortunately, we probably experience more of the unrighteous anger than we do the righteous. Think about that traffic situation. You are sitting there, all jammed up on Interstate Highway. There is nothing you can do about it, but you feel your blood pressure rising and you may even start saying things to people who can’t hear you. What is the purpose of your anger and what does it accomplish? (Of course, when I feel like this, *I* am frustrated. When you feel like this, *you* are angry.) The cause of your anger is your own self-interest; whether you are wanting to get to work, play, or just get there, wherever and whatever *there* is. Your anger in this situation does not accomplish anything. It will not make the traffic move any faster or move all of the cars out of the way. This is not righteous anger.

We see unrighteous anger in all of its multifaceted ugliness in the story of Cain in Genesis 4. Cain and his younger brother Abel have come to present themselves before God in worship. Cain brought some of the fruit of the ground that he had worked. He was a farmer. Abel, who was a shepherd, brought of the firstborn of his flock. They both offered their sacrifices and God accepted Abel’s offering and rejected Cain’s. When Cain realized this he literally “burned” and his countenance fell. Cain’s burning means that he became angry. Anger is portrayed in Scripture as well as through other literature and art down through the centuries as fire; and understandably so. Anger feels like fire burning inside of us. Cain’s countenance fell because he was put to shame before God and before his little brother. He is embarrassed. Eventually Cain’s anger leads him to murder Abel.

When we examine Cain’s unrighteous anger, we see the causes for and the nature of

unrighteous anger. First we notice *anger is a reaction to a revealed deficiency*. This deficiency may be real or perceived. In Cain's case it was real because God revealed it to him. But there are times that people, because they are caught in the grip of fear of appearing ignorant or falling short in some way, will believe that people are purposely trying to point out their deficiencies in knowledge, ability, or accomplishments simply by what they do or the praise they receive. But as mentioned, Cain's deficiency was revealed by God and very real. 1John 3.11-15 examines this story and tells us that Cain killed his brother Abel because his works were evil and his brother's were righteous.

Anger, like its siblings pride and envy, is *competitive*. It doesn't use competition simply to make itself better but to crush the other person. Whenever it is defeated or bettered by another person in any way, it flames up and seeks to consume. Because of this underlying attitude, Anger cannot handle being *corrected*. God told Cain that if he does well he will be accepted. God is giving him correction and telling him that if he does what he has been commanded, God will accept him. But Cain wanted to be accepted on his own terms. He, therefore, believed the correction was undeserved and misplaced. There was no real deficiency in his mind.

To anger correction is not seen as something positive. It is not something that seeks my betterment but only my belittlement. Correction is showing me up for my ignorance or lack of ability. Like bellows to a fire is correction to an angry man. Instead of humbly receiving the correction and being improved by it, Anger rises up in defense of itself, seeking to justify itself or point out the deficiencies in others or simply abuse the other person so that they will be fearful of ever correcting it again.

Anger walks around with a chip on its shoulder and has the uncanny ability to see and hear things that don't even exist. That is, it receives insults that are not meant to be insults and responds with the ferocity that is anger. Henry Fairlie notes about the response of anger in such cases, "Whether with deeds or words, the wish is to harm another. But our fixation also harms us when we succumb to it. It makes us imagine slights and injuries where there are none, and to feel an undue indignation at them. When we say that someone is quick to anger, we do not mean only that he gets angry quickly, but that he gets angry at things that do not deserve such vehemence." We do this out of a sense of self protection. That is, if I become angry, that is my way of dealing with the problem and I really don't have to deal with the problem that has been pointed out. William Willimon comments that "Anger protects the status quo of the ego. Anger isolates us, keeps us from having to be affected by the world around us, from having to change." (74) Anger keeps us from having to face ourselves and our real deficiencies. It is always making excuses for them or turning the tables on someone else.

Anger is a reaction to a revealed deficiency, but it is also *a reaction to a loss of control*. Anger expresses itself many times as the loss of control, but that is not what I am dealing with here. Anger is a *reaction* to a real or perceived loss of control over a situation or another person. In other words, you believe that you have or are supposed to have control over some situation or person, but you discover that you don't.

This loss of control is realized when you have a blocked goal. Cain's goal was to be accepted by God (even though he went about it the wrong way). He prepared his sacrifice and offered it to God. He wanted to be accepted. It might have been so that he could simply be on equal footing as his brother, Abel, but acceptance was his goal. Anger is stoked by the discovery that you wanted things to be done a certain way but realize that they cannot. Instead of adjusting, you want to continue to do it your own way. We become angry when we discover that the way we want to go has a roadblock. Instead of turning around and finding the right road, we continue

to run into the concrete barrier, insisting that we must go this way, even though it will not budge.

Anger desires control; whether over the situation or control over another person. Cain wants to control the situation and eventually believes that he does by killing Abel. This is manifested throughout life. The temper tantrum of the toddler is the toddler saying, “You didn’t do things my way. I’ve lost control of this situation. Now I will become angry and regain control of the situation.” The toddler wants to set the agenda. Anger’s desire for control expresses itself on the playground with children. Some child throws an angry hissy fit wanting everybody to conform to him and his agenda. He wants control. Adults are certainly not immune. We sense a loss of control and we begin yelling and screaming at friends, spouse, and children to bring them back under our control.

The deceptiveness of anger in these forms is that it works; albeit temporarily, but it works nevertheless. Cain does gain the mastery over his brother. The toddler, with weak, acquiescent parents gets what he wants. Other children don’t want to quit playing and they don’t want the brat to walk off the field, so they give in. It works for a while. The subjects of verbal and physical assaults don’t want to hear this or be the object of a tirade, so they comply. But the damage that anger like this causes is difficult to repair and ruptures relationships sometimes beyond repair.

Anger’s Targets

Anger needs a target; something or someone at which to shoot. Anger finds its focus upon and reacts to several different objects. Ultimately all of our unrighteous anger is directed toward God himself. You see, we have a self-centered, ego-centric view of the universe and why God exists. The universe is centered around me and God exist for the sole purpose of serving me and my self-interests. When we discover that we are not the center of the universe and God does something that is not comfortable for us, we direct our anger toward him; even though it may be expressed to his image-bearers. There are times that we are legitimately frustrated and puzzled about why God is doing what he is doing. In those times, we learn from the Psalms, that it is okay to bring those frustrations to God and express them. But we can never accuse God of wrongdoing. We never have grounds for being angry with God.

There are times that our anger is directed toward ourselves. Certainly there are times that this is justified. We are, in fact, still sinners. Inasmuch as sin distorts God’s purpose for our lives, we should rise up in righteous indignation against ourselves and our sin. But there are times that this is taken to the extreme. We believe that maturity should happen over-night and that we are beyond this struggling with sin. St. John of the Cross said, “And this great impatience derives from their ambition to become saints in a single day. Many of them have good intentions and make grand resolutions, but they are not humble and place too much confidence in themselves. And the more resolutions they make, the more often they fall and the greater becomes their annoyance with themselves.” (Fairlie, 108-9)

Circumstances may also be the object of our anger. We don’t like the way things are falling out for us concerning our jobs, our marriages, our lack of being married, the traffic, the loss of loved ones, or such the like.

Of course, other people with whom we are in relationship can also be the objects of anger. There is a real or perceived injustice that has occurred. Someone has said something or done something and they become the object of your ire.

Anger’s Expressions

Once anger is kindled and is focused upon any one of these objects, it begins to take expression in our lives. At that point anger seeks *revenge*. It seeks to get back at the other person somehow or in some way. This may occur in thought, word, or deed. We begin to see anger in our thought life when we begin to lose perspective on a situation. Our minds become singularly focused upon the object of our anger and how to get back at them, that we disregard the consequences to ourselves.

Anger is insanity. The ancient Roman poet Horace said that “Anger is a short madness.” You can’t think straight. You lose perspective. It truly is temporary insanity. In God’s court, of course, that is no defense that will get you off of the hook. But Anger broods many times. And as it stews in its juices it becomes bitterness. You seethe over the injustice that has been committed against you.

Some people might wonder if they are really bitter. Let me give you a few little tests. You might be bitter if you replay in your head again and again what the other person did to you. You might be bitter if you imagine ways you might be able to take revenge. You might be bitter if you continue to think of ways you might be able to put the person in his place. He consumes your thoughts. At that point a root of bitterness, as the writer of Hebrews describes it, takes root in your heart. Eventually it will bear fruit if it is not unearthed and dealt with. If not dealt with swiftly and surely, bitterness will spring up into full-blown hatred. Hatred is anger that has come to emotional fruition. This is complete antipathy toward another. You couldn’t care less when bad things happen to the person or if the person goes to hell. In fact, you wish that he would.

Thoughts, if allowed to linger turn into words. These words seek and accomplish destruction. One writer said that “Whoever said that sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt us, must have lived among deaf mutes.” (Fairlie, 87) Anger uses verbal assaults that demean and seek to dominate through force; a force that can appear calm and controlled as well as wild and in a rage. This is the yelling and screaming that goes on between husbands and wives, siblings, friends, co-workers, or even the bad driver in traffic.

Thoughts grow into words, and words grow into deeds. Anger has on many occasions expressed itself in physical abuse. Whether it the children on the playground who get into a tussle or the husband who beats his wife and children, Anger finds expression in seeking to dominate physically at times. As we learn from Cain, ultimately, anger can and does murder.

For these reasons and more that James tells us that we should be “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” We don’t wait around for explanations, we jump to conclusions and are slow to hear. Being slow to hear we are quick to speak and quick to anger. When this is pointed out to us, as I have mentioned previously, we seek to justify ourselves. This happens in a number of ways. Some will say, “Yes, I have a short fuse. But I explode and then everything is alright afterwards.” Alright for whom? For you maybe, but not for those around you. A shotgun only goes off for a split second, but it can leave a great amount of damage in the wake of its blast. That is a terribly self-centered approach to dealing with the problem. Of course, many in the world say that you must “express yourself.” You shouldn’t hold it in. You should get your anger out. That is the counsel of hell. The angry fool is only concerned about venting its own feelings. Proverbs says that it is a fool who vents all of his feelings (Prov 29.11). Anger of this sort is the habit of a fool. Anger is only concerned about “getting things off of my chest.” The health and well-being of others is not anger’s concern. It may be a form of therapy, but it is a fool’s therapy.

Ultimately anger does not work. James says that the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. James was more than likely dealing with leaders in the church who

believed that fomenting a violent rebellion was the right thing to do in the face of persecution. James says the opposite. Anger does not ultimately produce good fruit, only poisonous fruit that brings death to relationships.

Husbands and wives: your yelling and screaming at one another when you disagree, how has that worked out for you over the years? Has it really improved your relationship? I doubt that it has. It is built up walls between the both of you so that you can't live with one another without fear of setting the other person off. It squelches it for the time being, but it yields a horrible fruit. If it does not produce a good marriage, why do you keep doing it? It is insanity. And stop using those excuses or justifications for your anger. "That's just the way we handle things. That is my personality. It's in our blood. I'm a Scot, an Irishman, an Italian, I have red hair, I'm a redneck" ... or whatever. It's in your blood alright. But it goes back much further than the division of the nations and your particular heritage. It goes all the way back to Adam and is expressed in his firstborn son. For the Christian our "blood" is the blood of Christ gives us no justification for our unrighteous anger.

We also say, "He made me react that way." Your expression of anger is *your choice*. What people do may run cross-grain with you, but how you respond is an act of your will, and you can choose not to respond in sinful anger by the power of God's Spirit whom you have if you belong to Christ. "I just lost it." Do you really believe that this will justify what you did? Is your temporary insanity plea a legitimate excuse for the damage you've done? It is no excuse at all.

The Cure For Unrighteous Anger

How then do we handle Anger when it begins to stoke up in our hearts? Again, it must be noted that these are not cures once-and-for-all-time, world without end. These salves must be applied daily so that the flare-ups stay under control.

One cure is something of a defensive measure: *guard your friendships*. Proverbs 22.24-25 says, "Make no friendship with an angry man, And with a furious man do not go, Lest you learn his ways And set a snare for your soul." If your most intimate acquaintances have and are not seeking to deal with problems of Anger, you yourself will be ensnared by it. You begin to image the people you hang around the most. If that is an angry man, then you will become angry.

Another prescription for anger is a constant and high dose of *humility*. Don't think so much of yourself that you are easily offended. For instance, when someone corrects you, receive the correction and look at it as a way to improve. Also don't think that when people are talking around you that they are talking about your inadequacies. Not everybody is as consumed with you as you are. Understand that God's cosmic purpose is bigger than you are. Understand that you are not the center of the universe and that God does not exist to be your bellhop. Things will happen to you that you don't like, yet in all of it God is working out his grand purpose, not only for your life, but for the life of the whole world.

The last and probably the greatest dose of medicine that we need to cure our anger is *forgiveness*. Just after Paul tells the Ephesians to be angry and sin not, he follows that up by saying that they are not to let the sun go down on their wrath. (Eph 4.26) We are to be keeping short accounts; taking care of issues as they arise. For husbands and wives, this means that you shouldn't go to bed angry. (Phyllis Diller misunderstands this counsel and says, "Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight." (Willimon, 75))

The first thing that needs to be done when applying the salve of forgiveness is *confession*. This is not confession of the other person's sin but confession of your own; especially if you have

responded in anger. Confession is *not*, “You really upset me with your selfish, harsh comments, so I was justifiably frustrated and responded inappropriately.” You need to confess *as if the other person had not sinned at all*. “I should have never responded like that. I was angry and said things I shouldn’t have said and did things I shouldn’t have done. Please forgive me.” That is confession of my sin. It might be asked, “What do I do if the other person doesn’t repent and ask for forgiveness.” Well, you can’t change the other person or make him do the right thing. You must stand ready to forgive. Understand that if repentance doesn’t take place, full reconciliation cannot occur. But that doesn’t mean that you cannot forgive at some level. If you don’t bitterness will rise up in your heart and eventually destroy you. You must deal with your own bitterness. The only way to do that is to leave vengeance to the Lord. That means that you can’t take vengeance yourself in thought, word, or deed.

Understand this as well: When you become bitter and harbor that bitterness, you become just as guilty as the person who wronged you. You are now in sin. You must deal with your own bitterness while realizing that you cannot change the other person one iota. The only way to deal truly and adequately with anger is through realizing that God’s anger has been appeased against you. Paul told the Ephesians that they were to forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven them. They were to imitate God. (Eph 4.32; 5.1) God has forgiven you even more than you realize. Now, you must act like him and forgive others. If you don’t anger will be a very deadly sin. But as you do this—that is, learn to forgive, refusing to hold bitterness—you will become thick-skinned and tenderhearted.

Anger can be righteous and it should be a part of who we are as God’s people. But we must guard against its perversion. And when it does rear its ugly head, we must deal with it swiftly and thoroughly lest it become a poison to our own souls.

Prayer: O God of pure, righteous anger, grant that I may only and always be angry with that which angers you.

THE DROOPY EYES OF SLOTH

Read: 2Sam 11.1-27; Matt 25.14-30; 1Cor 15.50-58

Well, we have finally come to a sin in this list of Seven Deadly sins that we know that we really don’t have a problem with in our own lives or in our culture. We know that we cannot be slothful because we are a 24/7/365 culture. We are always busy. We are on our cell phones all the time. We have our daily organizers packed from the time we get up to the time we go to bed. Practically every minute of the day is accounted for. There is no possible way that we could squeeze anything else in the day. Even when we get a day off we are busy. We don’t do like others and just laze around the house. No. We must go somewhere or be doing something. There is no possible way that we could ever be guilty of this sin of sloth. “In fact,” you might say, “since I have been so busy this week and there is nothing you could possibly say about sloth that will deal with me, I will skip this chapter and make a to-do list for tomorrow; that is, if I can keep my eyes open long enough to do it. You know, it has been terribly busy.” No, we may not think that we could possibly be guilty of sloth. But sloth is a little more slippery than this. Yes, sometimes it is quite obvious, but, just as with all sin, never underestimate the deceptiveness of sloth. It can and will slip up on you in the most subtle of ways.

The Character of Sloth

Sabbath Rest: The virtuous host of Sloth

Sin feeds off of and perverts a virtuous host. Sloth, like other sins, does the same. The tricky part about Sloth is that it attaches to and leeches off of so many things, it is quite difficult to nail one host down. I believe, though, that sloth is a distortion of Sabbath rest. I specifically mention “Sabbath” because it carries with it all the necessary biblical connotations of the proper relationship between rest and work. And it is here that sloth begins its work of perversion.

When God created the world in six days, he finished his work and entered into Sabbath. Man, who is created in his image, is to follow this pattern established by God and labor for six days and rest one day. But man learns something about himself from the beginning of his creation. Man’s first full day of creation is God’s Sabbath. Man begins with rest in God’s presence and then works from that rest for the next six days with the goal of entering into a fuller and greater Sabbath. Sabbath rest is the foundation for man’s labor and his goal. Man begins with the grace of God giving him rest, works from that foundation of grace, and enters into God’s gracious provision of rest after his labor is done, there to enjoy the fruit of his labor in the presence of God.

Even though God provides this Sabbath for man to enter into each week, that Sabbath goal cannot be appreciated without the six days of labor that lead up to it. Sabbath rest, the goal of our labor, provides *purpose* for our work and causes us to labor diligently. There is coming a time when our labor will be brought to its purpose. Our labor will be evaluated and enjoyed in a time of rest. Having the goal of this rest from our labors so that we might enjoy the fruit of our labors provides purpose for our labor. The fact that we have labored makes our rest both enjoyable and meaningful. (I will talk about this more when we get to the *cure* for Sloth a little bit later.)

Though sloth may look like rest or relaxation, it is not. Sloth is not warded off with busyness. I, maybe like you, don’t like to waste time. I normally take books with me everywhere I go so that if I get stuck somewhere, I can still be doing something productive. And, if I am waiting on one thing to get done, I can be doing something else while that is getting done. But this doesn’t mean that I have escaped the lazy yet firm grips of sloth. As Peter Kreeft aptly notes, “Relaxing is not sloth. The person who never relaxes is not a saint but a fidget.” (155) Idleness is sometimes good and necessary because it is reflective of the rest that God provides in the midst of arduous labor. And God provides rest and relaxation in the midst of arduous labor. He prepares a Table in the midst of our battles with our enemies according to Psalm 23. He is not an Egyptian taskmaster who drives his people into the ground. In fact, he delivers us out of Egypt in order to bring us into our Sabbath. Psalm 127, speaking of not over-working in your dominion vocation says, “*It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late, To eat the bread of sorrows; For so He gives His beloved sleep.*” Our God gives us rest. Sometimes it is quite good, and, yes, even quite productive, to be idle. God’s Sabbath rest provides us with all that we need to labor for the future. We need rest.

Sloth: Apathy and Indifference

Sloth plays upon this need for rest and distorts it, perverting rest into apathy and

indifference, immobilizing us in the things that really matter and consuming us with a passionless passion for ourselves. Sloth, because it just seems to sit there like the proverbial couch potato, would make it apparently easier to grasp. But it is difficult to get hold of. Sloth is a complex sin. And, quite frankly, we may not want to spend the time or expend the effort to examine this sin, which itself is an indication of self-perpetuating nature of the sin of sloth.

Henry Fairile begins to get at the nature of Sloth when he says that "... the sin of Sloth is a state of dejection that gives rise to torpor of mind and feeling and spirit; to a sluggishness or, as it has been put, a poisoning of the will; to despair, faintheartedness, and even desirelessness, a lack of real desire for anything, even for what is good." (113) Sloth is rooted in, not so much the activity of the body, but the motivation of the will. Sloth deals with your desires or lack thereof.

This is not to say that Sloth is not seen in the activities of the body. Surely what goes on in the heart or man with his lack of desire will reveal itself in certain inactivities of the body. Sometimes sloth is quite obvious to us. The obviously slothful man is the one who refuses to work in anything productive in order to provide for his own needs or for those for whom he is responsible. The sloth does not care about his responsibilities and does not move himself in any significant way to fulfill those responsibilities.

The incident in David's life in 2Samuel 11 provides an example of this. Of course, in this story we normally focus on the adultery and consequent murder that David committed. Those are the big sins that we see. But his lust, adultery, and murder were generated from sloth.

The Bible says that it was the time of the year when kings go out to war. It was literally, "the return of the year." It was spring time, the time of resurrection. It was at this time that kings fulfilled their responsibilities to protect their people and go out to war against their enemies. David, in the previous chapter, had just accomplished such a task as he soundly defeated the Syrians who were allied with the Ammonites (cf. 2Sm 10). God had given him some rest during the rainy season (a time when it would not be feasible to wage war). But now it was time to take up his task again and go out and finish off the Ammonites.

David sends Joab out with all of his men and all the warriors of Israel to do the job. That is not really a problem in itself. That happened in the last chapter as well. But what we see throughout the story is that David is not participating with his men at any level in the war.

Uriah, the Gentile incorporated into the people of God and one of David's mighty men, stands as a foil to David in this story. For you see, when the men of Israel were engaged in holy war, their camp was holy and they were to keep themselves from relations with women; something Uriah did with great self-restraint. David did so before when he was on the run from Saul. He and his men had kept themselves from women and were allowed to eat the bread of the Presence from the Tabernacle (1Sam 21.4-5). If David participated with his men in the war, sexual relations would have been off limits.

David's sin is a heightened form of the neglect of his responsibilities in warfare. Instead of being engaged with the men, he is laying on his couch all day and finally gets up to take a stroll around the roof of the king's palace. David is in the grip of sloth. Sloth, as revealed in David, is *indifferent toward one's responsibilities*. Sloth refuses to stir itself up to do what it is called to do. It disregards the legitimate vocations given by God and decides for itself that inactivity is the best way to approach one's responsibilities.

David also shows us that *sloth is purposeless idleness*. As I mentioned earlier, there is an idleness that can be refreshing and purposeful. But sloth lays its long, lazy fingers on purposeful idleness and leeches all purpose out of it, leaving us only with meaningless inactivity. Sloth is not rest *from* something and *for the purpose* of being able to engage oneself later. It is not

refreshing. It is simply idleness for idleness sake. It is rising up from your couch in the afternoon when you should be at war, simply taking a stroll on the roof of the king's palace, and engaging in voyeurism.

The book of Proverbs is filled with exhortations concerning and warnings against being slothful. Proverbs tells us that the slothful man will not plow in the winter and will therefore beg during the harvest and have nothing (Prov 20.4). We also learn that the desire of the slothful man kills him because his hands refuse to labor (Prov 21.25). This is obvious sloth.

The apostles of Christ, and especially Paul, have things to say about people like this as well. Paul says that if a man refuses to work, providing for those of his own household, he has denied the faith (!) and is worse (!) than an unbeliever (1Tim 5.8). Paul deals with labor issues in both of his letters to the Thessalonians. Paul wants the people to lead quiet lives in which they work diligently and provide for themselves so that they don't have to depend upon others for their sustenance (1Thess 4.11-12). In the second letter to the Thessalonians the language becomes very strong as he says that if a man refuses to work then he should not eat (2Thess 3.10). The man who refuses to work relinquishes his privileges to food. Paul does not believe (and he is echoing the whole of Scripture on this) that laziness should be subsidized. It should not be subsidized but penalized. This does not mean that Paul is cruel. He knows that a man's hunger is a good motivating factor for him to repent of his slothfulness and will drive him to do what is necessary. If laziness is subsidized (whether the church or the state), if you keep bailing people out who are slothful, they will never do what must be done. They will always believe that someone will be there to bail them out. They will never grow up.

How much is this appropriate for the current state of affairs in our nation at this time! We subsidize slothfulness which manifests itself as irresponsibility, and some people naively believe that we will climb out of our problems like this. Of course, all of this is doing is making the government more powerful and tyrannical over us and it is promoting a state of perpetual infancy. Our mother, the State, holds us to her breasts perpetually as helpless infants who cannot do anything for ourselves. The Sloth loves to have it so; even though at 30, 40, and 50 infant's milk is not enough to continue to sustain life.

Learning to work and be disciplined to fulfill your responsibilities even when it is not the most pleasant thing to do at that time is a good lesson to learn at an early age. This kind of work ethic will propel you into greater maturity. Even though your maturity may be penalized by the government, by the way, it is still a good thing and will not be forgotten by God.

Children who have parents that make them work and instill disciplines in their lives to fulfill their responsibilities even when you must fight yourself to do it, ought to be thankful. They are doing them an invaluable kindness. Children must overcome that spirit of sloth when they are told what they need to be doing. They will not want to fulfill their responsibilities. They will want to sleep. They will want to go play basketball. They will want to go shopping. They will want to go somewhere, anywhere besides the house and their chores. They must obey their parents and do battle with sloth.

Parents, if you are not teaching your children how to work, giving them responsibilities and expecting them to be fulfilled and penalizing them somehow when they are not, you are doing them an unspeakable injustice. If you are too slothful yourself to require anything of them because it requires too much of you, you are encouraging them to be lazy. If you simply hand your children everything and never require work from them, they will never appreciate anything. They will never know the satisfaction and contentment of true rest but will always be fidgety and discontent even though they have a thousand toys with which to play. Sloth is a hideous creature

that will latch its fingers on your children and hang on until the despair that it causes will suck all of the joy of life out of them.

There are very obvious examples of sloth to which we can point. Sometimes it is very noticeable in very lazy children and adults. But sometimes sloth is not so obvious. It hides quite well behind the mask of busyness at times. Busyness does not mean that you have successfully beat back that creature, sloth. *Au contraire*, your excessive busyness may actually be an indication of sloth. By excessive busyness you may mask the pursuit of the things that matter; neglecting your responsibilities simply for banal activity. You focus and pour your efforts into things that really don't matter. You are apathetic to that which is your responsibility. William Willimon notes that "Distraction and restlessness of spirit are listed by the Fathers as aspects of apathy, failure to focus on what matters." (87) You are busy all of the time. Always distracted and restless. But that might be a revelation of your indifference toward things the things that matter. Fairlie summarizes well how busyness masks our sloth. He speaks about the fact that our culture does so many things; we are busy all of the time, but we do not know why. There is no meaning, no purpose. Only busyness. By this we avoid the most important questions in life. "This," says Fairlie, "is the most terrifying thing of all to us, because our primary need is denied, our need for meaning. This terror is so great that it must be pushed down far into the unconscious by sloth, or we would go insane. So we cover it up with a thousand busynesses. Thus, paradoxically, it is our very sloth that produces our frantic activism." (155-6) You may be busy all the time because you simply don't want to sit down long enough to think about the most important things in life. You are avoiding the work, the effort, the pain, and the perseverance that it takes to deal with the important issues. That, my beloved, is sloth.

Busyness may also mask that you are not fulfilling some of your God-given vocations. Sloth is the neglect of those responsibilities. Sloth involves neglecting what you are supposed to do with what you would rather do instead. You would rather have "fun" than to do what you are supposed to do. You busy yourself with "fun" and neglect your responsibilities. That is Sloth. Like the other sins, Sloth is terribly self-centered. You are busy with work and cannot fulfill your responsibilities toward your family or worship. You are busy "relating" to other people outside of your home and neglect the proper rearing of your children. The bottom line is this: You would rather be doing something else other than fulfilling the responsibilities God has given you. That would require you to deny yourself and what you want to do over here. That requires too much effort, too much time-management, too much of me.

This is all less obvious because we are terribly busy. But being terribly busy may be more dangerous than being overtly lazy. At least in the overtly lazy sloth is readily identifiable. In the busy man there is every indication that he has successfully killed the creature.

Sloth is sometimes obvious and sometimes not so obvious. But sloth always has some defining characteristics which identify it. *Sloth has no larger story and, thus, no purpose or meaning.* When I speak about having "no larger story," I am speaking about a story that defines who you are, why you are here, why you do what you do, and where you are going. This story answers all of these questions for you. As a Christian your story is given to you in the story of Scripture. Generally, you are a creature, created in the image of God. You exist to be in relationship with God and one day, after your labor is over on this earth, you will enjoy the fruit of your labor in rest with God. This gives your life meaning and purpose. Sloth does not acknowledge this story and does not believe it. Sloth doesn't have, nor does it desire, a context to understand where activity and rest fit in.

Boredom is the result of Sloth. There is no meaning in activity. There is no meaning in

rest. We have a thousand toys to play with, but we are bored. Boredom refuses to acknowledge that there is purpose in what I am doing right now; whether work or rest. Sloth simply moves from meaningless now to meaningless now, always living in the present but never really living at all. Life is simply not interesting, and we refuse to make it so. “This is Sloth, refusing the God-given means to make our lives interesting,” says Willimon. (88) Life just happens to the slothful man. This is the great sin of our age in which sloth is praised, even if it is not given that name. Sloth says, “Who cares?” “I couldn’t care less.” Sloth is “laid back,” not really excited about anything. Never stirred to righteous indignation; never really stirred. “Live and let live.” “I’m okay, you’re okay.” Don’t get too jazzed about what anyone else is doing. Just “be cool” with them whatever way they are living. It’s their lives, not yours. They must be able to express themselves the way they *feel* is best for them.

This whole idea of self-expression is many times itself a mask for sloth. The schoolteacher of today—and maybe many school systems themselves—cover up their lack of discipline in the classroom and their refusal to teach and make children speak well and learn their subjects is masked by saying, “We encourage self-expression.” It is sloth. Sloth floats around having no focus. It is undisciplined, just carried about by the waves of today. No larger purpose, and consequently, no meaning in life.

Related to this, *sloth has no hunger or passion*. What’s the use? It is driven to do nothing and accomplishes just that: nothing. “‘In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair,’ says Dorothy Sayers. ‘It is the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.’” (Quoted in Fairlie, 114)

Sloth is gripped by fear. This we see in Matthew 25.14-30. Jesus tells the parable of a master, his three servants, and the money he gives them to manage while he is away. This is a parable concerning the kingdom of heaven and the time that Jesus will leave and when he will return. The servant that was given one talent was so gripped by fear of losing that talent, that he refused to invest it. He didn’t want to take a chance. He buried it in the ground until the master returned. And when the master returned and he gave his long list of excuses, the master says that he is a wicked and *slothful* servant. Taking chances requires diligence, effort, perseverance, and the potential for failure. Why try?

All of this manifests the underlying problem with sloth: *sloth is ultimately unbelief*. Faith requires effort. Faith requires working at things, the responsibilities God has given to us and believing him for the results. Unbelieving sloth says that those things are not worth working at. Sloth gives up on the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness because it asks too much of me. Sloth gives up on God. Sloth says that even though God says that our labor is not meaningless and that our pursuits of truth, beauty, and goodness are not futile, we believe that they are. Sloth says that God is a liar at worst or at least that he himself is not worthy of our efforts. Once again pastor Willimon is helpful.

In my pastoral experience, what people sometimes call doubt is more often, more properly called Sloth. Faith requires active response, engagement with God, a willingness to be formed and transformed by God’s work in us. The Reformers were concerned not to make ‘faith’ into a new form of ‘works righteousness,’ in which we attempt to save ourselves by ourselves. But today I wonder if the greater spiritual danger is that gradual dissipation of faith that comes from a simple unwillingness to take the trouble to believe.

(Willimon, 82-3)

Faith requires something of us. It requires engagement, response, and effort. Sometimes it is easier to avoid these things. Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of our Lord, is an example of sloth. Instead of doing what Peter did, repent and return to the Lord, Judas went out and hanged himself in despair rather than take the effort.

Now, if our government is guilty of subsidizing sloth in terms of productive labor, then the church is guilty of subsidizing sloth concerning understanding our relationship with God. Churches—both liturgical and non-liturgical—slip into mindless and meaningless ritualism because of a lack of diligence to keep before them the meaning and purpose of what we do. Much of the fault lies in the pastoral office in the church. Pastors don't want to take the time or effort to learn about, much less explain, the meaning and purpose of ritual in itself and of their particular rituals. That is not seeker-friendly and might drive people away. It takes too much effort, may cost me too much, and is a great risk. Congregants are not off the hook with this one either. They don't care enough to want to learn. They just want to come with minimum requirements, pain, and discomfort. They want to "do their time" then go home and sit on the couch and watch television or get back to their "real lives."

Becoming dispassionate about worship (and remember it can happen in any "style" church) is the expression of sloth. How does the church respond many times when it recognizes this dispassionate response? We must make it more exciting so that the people will come and respond. While putting their finger on the problem and probably well-intentioned, they foster the state of slothfulness. Instead of telling people to awake out of their stupors and do what is right, they acquiesce to their infantile desires and watch them, like a weird form of Benjamin Button, shrink to greater and greater degrees of infancy. Worship takes (and it should take) a certain amount of effort, both physically and mentally. This is because this is a relationship. And relationships take work. Worship takes effort and diligence; and it is difficult to do that when you stay out all Saturday night and don't get any sleep. Lethargic worship is slothful worship. You are not "feeling it" that day, so you don't think the relationship is worth your effort. You are just going to "get through it." Fight sloth. Screw up some energy and do what is right. Worshiping by faith sometimes means that you are going to put everything you have into it, stop looking depressed, and believe that God is doing what he said he would do, even in repeated forms. Worship as entertainment fosters sloth. We don't want to encourage people to think. We simply want them to "express themselves." Who cares about the disciplined responses we are supposed to have to God? Worship is a time for me to do what *feels* right to me.

When you confront sloth, it always has a thousand excuses or rationalizations. We read in Prov 26.13-16: "The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!" As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly." Lions did not roam the ancient streets any more than they do today. "A lion in the road!" as a reason not to go out is a made up excuse as to why the sluggard stays in his bed and turns like a door on its hinges. The sluggard being wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly means that he can always give you what he thinks is a valid reason about why he can't fulfill his responsibilities, even if seven men are all telling him the same thing. He is wiser than all of them. When you peel through all the layers of excuses and rationalizations, what you finally see is the fact that the sloth simply does not believe God. He refuses to work at faith. "The church is too messed up to be reformed. We need to pull off to

ourselves and not worry about anyone else.” “Society is too evil to change. We should give up.” These are all the rationalizations that are the result of viewing the world through the droopy eyes of sloth.

The Cure for Sloth

Thankfully, there is a cure for sloth. The cure for sloth is not necessarily to “get to work,” as much as they may be involved. Adding more things to your “to do” list is not necessarily the answer. The answer to sloth is not “work harder” but *faith in the work of Christ*. The answer to the sin of sloth is found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the answer to our sloth is not our work but Jesus’ work. In John 6.29 we learn from the lips of Jesus that the work that God would have us to do is to believe in Jesus. That is, we are to have faith in Jesus. We are to trust Jesus. But what happens when we trust Jesus? What happens when we genuinely believe in Christ? James 2 says that it will be evidenced in our work. Genuine faith is always made manifest in our works.

What gives your work and rest meaning is that they are accepted by God in Christ. This is the conclusion that Paul reaches in 1 Corinthians 15.58. Paul is finishing the longest evaluation and explanation of the resurrection of Jesus found in Scripture. How do you think he would conclude this passage? “Now revel in the glories of this victory of Christ over sin and the grave.” He does that to some extent. But Paul’s conclusion is: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” What we do now as Christians is building for the coming consummated kingdom. What we do now will be taken up, transformed, and used in the consummation of the kingdom. Our labor is not purposeless. This is evident from the fact that Jesus’ resurrected body still bears the nail-prints and the scar from the spear brought about the resurrection. His work remains evident in the new creation. As it is with him, so it will be for us. God does not simply redeem our spirits or even our bodies apart from what we do. In fact, it is impossible to separate what we do in our bodies from our bodies themselves. Our works are redeemed in Christ as well. They are taken up in him and used for the building of the kingdom. As one pastor said, “We are not saved by our work, but our work is saved.” In Revelation 14.12-13 we read: “Here is the patience of the saints; here *are* those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, ‘Write: “Blessed *are* the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”’ “Yes,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.”” “Their works follow them.” This means that everything that we do has purpose and meaning. Our works are being saved in Christ.

We learn something about this from the parable of Jesus in Matthew 25. Each of the servants was empty-handed in the beginning. Everything that they had they received from the Master. But the Master fills their hands with responsibilities, each according to his abilities. When he gives them these responsibilities, he expects them to turn a profit. Jesus gives us all certain responsibilities for which we will be held accountable when he returns. He expects to turn a profit on what he has given us. What he gives us and what we do with it will determine his judgment of us on the last day. Those who are faithful he will give more. Those who don’t respond in faith, he will take what they have away. The fact that our works are being redeemed in Christ gives meaning and purpose to each and everything that we do. That must be the motivating fire that gives us passion to do what we do with diligence, perseverance, hope, and joy.

Sloth gives up on God saying that nothing I'm doing amounts to anything. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ says this is absolutely wrong. Our labor is not in vain in the Lord. Everything we do in faith—that is because we believe God and are seeking to obey him—is part of Christ's kingdom-building project; even if we don't see how. The hope of the resurrection drives the apathy and indifference of sloth away and it informs us and fires us that because of Christ our work has meaning. And, one day, we will rest from our labors, our works will follow us, and we will enjoy the fruit, hearing those words that every faithful Christian longs to hear, "Well done, you good and faithful servant. Enter the joy of your Lord."

Prayer: Almighty God, Creator and Redeemer, continuously grant me the energy by your Spirit to be a faithful steward with everything you have placed in my hand.

THE DEEP, EMPTY EYES OF GREED

Read: 1Kgs 21.1-29; Lk 12.13-21; 1Tm 6.3-10, 17-19

"The point is, ladies and gentleman, 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. And greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA." So it was said by the character Gordon Gekko in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. This speech reflects to some degree or another an aspect of American life and philosophy that controlled us in the 1980's and 1990's and whose sour fruit we are eating presently. Greed, it is believed by some, is the driving force of our capitalistic society. I do not believe that this is totally accurate. I believe that true capitalism is founded in some good, solid, biblical principles. But just as with all sin, greed takes that which is good and twists it, distorting and perverting it until it is unrecognizable. As horrible as the fruit of greed is, greed is nevertheless praised as a virtue by many. Greed drives us to be better, stronger, faster, more productive. Greed, as Gekko lauds, is good.

This sin of greed or avarice, the fifth in our list of Seven Deadly Sins, was generally put by theologians just under pride in the pecking order of the seriousness of these sins. However we may categorize these sins in terms of their seriousness, greed is certainly serious and deadly. Like the other sins, greed bears resemblance to and helps perpetuate the other sins. As James Ogilvy writes, "Greed turns love into lust, leisure into sloth, hunger into gluttony, honor into pride, righteous indignation into anger, and admiration into envy. If it weren't for greed, we would suffer fewer of the other vices." (Quoted in Willimon, 104) Now we need to turn our attention to this sometimes miserly and sometimes wasteful but always insatiable sin of Greed.

The Character of Greed

The Desire for Dominion Fruitfulness: The virtuous host

Sin is a parasite. It has no life of its own but must find a righteous host, sucking all of the life out of it and leaving it distorted and twisted. We have seen this with each of the sins. Pride is

a distortion of the self-worth that we are supposed to have because we are creatures created and, for Christians, re-created in the image of God. Pride causes us to think too much of ourselves and too often of ourselves. Envy is the perversion of godly jealousy. Jealousy is a zeal to protect that which rightfully belongs to us. We seek to guard zealously the purity of our relationships. Envy always has its eyes on that which belongs to others and resents them for it and seeks to deprive them of it. Anger is a distortion of righteous indignation. Anger reveals our loves. When we love the right things we become infuriated when those things are threatened by sin; just like God. Unrighteous anger arises with an exaggerated self-interest. When we are shown to be deficient or cannot do what we want to do, unrighteous Anger reacts with venom, twisting a God-like virtue. Sloth feeds off of our need for and promise of Sabbath rest. We are supposed to labor diligently with purpose and meaning, looking toward our final reward. Sloth says that we don't need to worry about our responsibilities. Rather we should rest all of the time from them.

Greed does follows in the hideous family tradition. It finds a righteous host and twists, distorts, and perverts it until it is virtually unrecognizable. That righteous host I have labeled as the *desire for dominion fruitfulness*. When God created man in his own image, one aspect of that image-bearing nature was man's desire and mission for the dominion of creation. That is, man was to be creative like his heavenly Father, take proper possession over the world, and make the world fruitful. God himself gives us the pattern. God desires to possess and enjoy the fruit from his labor. This is seen plainly in the way Israel is described many times throughout Scripture in terms of a vine or vineyard or even a trees of some kind. God cultivates his people so that they may bear fruit to his enjoyment. He desires to possess so that he might enjoy.

As his image-bearers we should desire to possess in order to be fruitful as well. If we don't, we are probably caught in the grips of sloth. One characteristic of God's desire to possess and make things fruitful is that he does so in order that he might share with others. He creates the world and gives it to man so that man might make it fruitful so that God and man may enjoy it together. God creates, possesses, and makes things fruitful so that he might give it away to others. We, in turn, are to desire to possess and be productive so that we might share with and enjoy others. So, greed is *not* the desire to possess. That is a God-given, God-imaging quality. The Christian faith is not like Buddhism which seeks to alleviate all desires and to squelch all passions. The Christian faith wants to inflame proper passions and direct them toward their righteous goals.

Greed: Possessed by possessing

Greed takes this righteous quality of desire for dominion fruitfulness and distorts it into over-reaching to possess just for the sake of possessing. Greed wants to possess for its own sake. Greed is not interested in how fruitfulness benefits others. Greed desires to possess because it has a black hole in its heart that can never be filled with possessions or possessing.

Greed, like many of the other sins, is sometimes very slippery and difficult to nail down. Of course, sometimes it is very obvious in people who are totally given over to it, but rarely do we see greed in such an obvious fashion. People generally don't want to be known as being greedy, so they hide it in various ways and with different masks.

Thomas Aquinas says that Greed is "the immoderate desire for temporal possessions which can be estimated in money." (Kreeft, 109) Now don't be fooled by this sin. Greed is not the sin of the rich only. Greed is no respecter of persons. It afflicts the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor alike. It is not a matter of how much you have or don't have. It is a matter of

what you want; your desires and whether or not they are immoderate. The question that we must wrestle with on a daily basis is, When does my desire to possess become immoderate? There are no hard-and-fast lines which mark for us in our hearts the difference between the righteous desire to possess and the immoderate desire to possess. Therefore, we must always be on the guard; not to see how close we can come to immoderate desire, but to see how far away we can stay from it.

In guarding against Greed, we must always keep in mind that things, in and of themselves, are not evil. Possessions as possessions are not bad. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 6.10 that it is “the *love of money*” that is the root of all kinds of evil, not money itself. Money is good when it is in proper relationship to us; that is, when it is our servant. Money can serve us well in this world. But when it becomes our master, a good thing has turned bad because we have exalted it to the position of a god in our lives. The inordinate desire for things turns things into an idol. Paul tells the Colossians that covetousness or greed is idolatry (Col 3.5). Your immoderate desire to possess transforms the creation into an idol. You have then exalted the creation over the Creator.

Worship is a transformative act. That is, you *will*, without fail, reflect that which you truly worship. When you truly worship the one, true and living God through Christ by faith, you will be transformed into his image from glory to glory. But you will also be transformed into the image of the idols you worship as well. The Bible is clear about this in several places. In Psalm 115, after describing the deadness of idols despite all of their characteristics of life, the Psalmist says, “Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them” (Ps 115.8). Your life is a reflection of that which you truly worship. If you worship idols, you will become like them, which means that you will eventually die. The creation has no life in itself and therefore cannot give life. Only God himself is capable of that.

So, what characterizes the man who worships the idol of possessions? What are the warning signs that you have crossed over into immoderate desire to possess? What should you look for in your life to let you know if you are serving possessions? Greed is an insatiable thirst. You can never be satisfied. The horrible consequence of greed is that the more you imbibe the thirstier you become. You reach for possessions, obtaining some along the way, but it is like drinking salt water: the more you drink you are only creating more thirst. It is the drinking itself that makes you thirsty, yet you keep drinking because you believe that eventually your thirst will be quenched. In this way the greedy person exists in a living hell. The flames of greed in your heart create this constant thirst that can never be quenched. You seem to be eternally parched. Everything you drink to satisfy those flames is only fuel for the fire but can never douse it.

This eternal thirst is manifested in the two hands of greed: one that is clenched shut and one that is wide open. While seemingly being opposites, the miser and the wasteful person are both in the grip of greed. As Os Guinness notes, “... stinginess and waste are not opposites but two faces of this same deadly sin.” (Guinness, *Steering Through Chaos: Vice and Virtue in an Age of Moral Confusion*, 174) The miserly man is the one whose fist is clenched tightly on his possessions, unwilling to relinquish them for any reason. This is Ebenezer Scrooge who sits at his table and counts his money all the time to make sure that it is all there. It is interesting that our word “miser” is associated with “misery.” The miser lives a miserable life. This is the man who, when he pulls a dollar bill from his pocket, George Washington begins to squint because of the light. The miserly man believes that life is found in holding on to his possessions. He clutches them until death makes them part ... and death will make them part no matter how hard they are clutching their possessions when their breath leaves them. In excavating the ruins of the ancient city of Pompeii, that ancient Italian city destroyed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, the

first skeleton that was found was found still clutching silver coins in its fleshless hand. (cf. Kreeft, 112) Seeking to hold on to the possessions did not give this person life, and he did not take it with him. The miser is the man who does not like to see money spent on anything. He simply wants to hoard it up. It is Judas, who seeing the extravagance of Mary Magdalene's homage for her Lord in her pouring out ointment that was worth a year's wages, begrudges it (cf. John 12.3ff.).

If you have difficulty giving, if you are resistant to giving, whether that be your tithe or helping others when you have the ability, you might be in the grips of greed. Greed, because it does not want its hideous appearance to be seen by ourselves or others, will many times slink behind rationalizations. We have all sorts of reasons as to why we are clutching what we have so tightly. "I'm being frugal" or "I'm being practical" *might* be a rationalization for greed. Certainly we are to be wise with our possessions, but if we are not careful we can be stingy and Scrooge-like.

The other hand of Greed is wide-open all of the time. It is wasteful. There is nothing for which it will not spend its last penny to possess. It is prodigal. The Prodigal Son of Jesus' parable in Luke 15 is the story of a wastefully extravagant son. His words to his father are "give me" what belongs to me and then he goes out and wastes all that he has seeking to possess. The prodigal greed seeks to find life in spending and striving to possess thinking that he will eventually quench that fire of insatiable desire in his heart. He believes that he will eventually find life in possessing.

In short, Greed is being possessed by possessing. Fill in this blank in your own mind: "I would be happy if only I had _____." If that blank is filled in with anything other than God himself and what he promises to provide, then you are possibly in the grip of greed. As Augustine said, he who has God has everything; he who has everything but God has nothing; and he who has God plus everything else does not have any more than he who has God alone. (Kreeft, 157) Only in him are our deepest desires met and contentment found. If there is any possession of which you say, "I must have it and will not be satisfied until I do," you, my beloved, are a greedy person. At this point in our desire our possessions begin to define us; shaping our personality and goals, determining the direction our lives. Our possessions or the desire to possess begins to be the answer to life's important questions: who am I? I am a man who seeks to possess this thing. Why am I here, what is my purpose? To possess. Where am I going? I will have this possession that I desire.

Expressions of this greed are manifested in multi-faceted ugliness. I *simply must* have this particular brand of clothing; not because of any particular quality that it has of being long-lasting and a good value, but because it is a status symbol. I want people seeing me with this particular name or symbol on my clothing. We become defined by the shoes and shirts that we wear or desire to possess rather than our character. We become defined by the cars that we drive, the neighborhoods we live in, and a multitude of other *things*.

The greed in our culture to possess more and more is evidenced by our shopping craze. Shopping is not done simply out of necessity anymore. Shopping is a hobby sometimes bordering on what some people call an addiction (which is coming under the power of sin). We have TV networks set up so that we may shop 24/7. Get online and you can buy anything you want any time you want. We are shop-aholics. And the world is glad to oblige by building another shopping mall, starting a new online store, or cranking up another channel on the TV.

Then we are bombarded with advertising. Advertising, while it can be an honorable profession, seems mostly to be more about formation than information. That is, advertisers are

trying to create needs that weren't there to begin with. You must have this because if you do you will either look like this bodacious babe in the bathing suit selling toothpaste or you will attract her. We desire to possess, and the world is glad to feed us with all that we need to increase the fire. This causes us to work harder so that we can possess more. Henry Fairlie astutely observes, "As it is in ourselves, Avarice in our societies is a harassment, difficult to push aside. We are harassed into working in ways that are unsatisfying, so that we may buy things that we have been harassed into believing will satisfy us." (142)

The church is not exempt from this. We have fallen right in with the culture. We are just like all the merchandising shops around town advertising that our brand is the best and giving the impression that if they will just attend our church, all of their spiritual longings will be completely fulfilled. The church has capitulated to the culture because people want you to "sell" them on what you have. As William Willimon notes:

Perhaps we ought to think of the church as schooling in desire, learning how to want the right things in the right way and the right proportions. Unfortunately, many simply think of the church as just another way to get our needs met. Church is where I get one-stop shopping for the satisfaction of all my spiritual longs and urges. A capitalist economy tends to commodify [*sic*] everything, even Jesus. (Willimon, 106-7)

In all of these promises of Greed, it can never satisfy. In fact if greed did satisfy, it would be self-defeating. If you could actually attain all that was promised, there would be no more need for greed. Greed will not allow it to be so. Therefore greed will always drive you to possess but you will never fully possess. Therefore, you will always be frustrated, discontent, restless, and sad. Once you have possessed the thing you desire, it loses its luster and something else out there attracts you. It will feed upon you until there is nothing left to consume. You may pile up your possessions, but your heart cannot do the same. The hand may hoard, but the heart of man cannot hoard, says George MacDonald.

We see all of these characteristics and more in 1Kings 21. Here we read the story of Ahab and how he came into possession of Naboth's vineyard. Ahab desired to possess the vineyard because it was close to his palace. But this vineyard was a part of the inheritance given by YHWH to Naboth's family. The only reason Naboth could sell the vineyard would be to pay off debts. But even then he would have the option of redeeming or buying back the land later on. The main story line is about how Ahab is a wicked king who wants to turn the vineyard of Israel into a new Egypt and serve their gods. Ahab and Jezebel are like another Adam and Eve who are in the Garden of YHWH, Israel, and find a way to seize forbidden fruit. Just like Adam and Eve, Ahab and Jezebel are greedy. They do not look at all that they do have and give thanks for it. They look at what they do not have and seek to possess it. Greed drives them. And in this story we see some characteristics of greed.

Greed inordinately desires what it cannot and sometimes should not have. Sometimes possessing a certain something is not a bad thing. But when the desire controls you so that you cannot rest until you do, you are in the grip of greed. Of course, seeking to possess what you should not is dealt with in the Tenth Word/Commandment. This is like the horse or the cow who is in a field full of fine grass but goes to the edge of his pasture to stick his head through the fence, even at the risk of injuring himself, in order to get that little bit of grass on the other side. Greed doesn't simply aspire to something, it is consumed with having it. It must possess. You know that you are in the grip of Greed when you become depressed, like Ahab, because you

cannot have what you want.

Greed will seek to possess at all costs. Nothing was going to get in the way of Ahab having what he wanted; even if it meant lying against and murdering innocent and righteous Naboth. We may not go to such extremes. But we will pile ourselves under debt through credit cards and such the like because we want what we want and we want it now! So what that it means we become enslaved to our creditors, saddle our families with insurmountable financial problems, and eventually lose our good name.

Greed sees possessions as more important than people (and many times people as possessions or as means to possess). This is related to the last characteristic. Ahab doesn't care about the life of Naboth and his family. What he wants is more important than their lives. Greed blinds us to the priority of people over possessions. Here is a little test: Do you become infuriated when some possession of yours is damaged in some way so that you hold bitterness toward the person who damaged it? He scratched your car, he accidentally dropped your iPod (horror!), the child colored in my good and expensive theological book! (The last one may be justified anger. I'm still trying to work through that one.) I'm not suggesting that you allow people to destroy your things. That is another problem you might need to deal with them about. But we should not be so tied to our stuff that we are consumed by it to the point that we live in fear of things being damaged so that we are willing to damage relationships over them. Greed sees people as possessions and the means to attain more. They are not seen as people other than ourselves and appreciated as such, but they are objects to be absorbed into us, consumed by us.

Greed is further evidenced and warned against in the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12. A man approaches Jesus and wants his brother to divide the inheritance with him. Jesus answers with a parable that warns us to watch out for and be on guard against all greediness because life does not exist in the abundance of what a man possesses. That is the problem with Greed. *Greed believes that life is found in possessing.* I have already touched upon this, but it is shown to us explicitly in Jesus' words. Eating, drinking, and being merry is a mock feast in the presence of God. The Rich Fool does it in the presence of his possessions. God says to him, "Fool! This night your soul shall be required of you." He will die that evening. There is no life in his possessions. Neither can you take them with you out of this life.

Alexander the Great, although a pagan, realized this. You might recall that at a very young age Alexander conquered the known world and sat down and wept because there were no more lands to conquer. He died shortly after. He commanded that at his funeral one of his empty hands should hang out of his coffin to show that he took none of it with him. Possessions cannot grant you life. They only leave you like all idols leave you: dead.

Greed believes that security is found in possessing. The Fool says, "I have enough good laid up for many years." He believed that he was secure because of all of his possessions. Many times we think the same thing. Sometimes we think, "If I can have this amount of money in my IRA, I will be secure." This, my beloved, is the deceitfulness of riches. We believe that they provide us with security. How we should be learning our lessons right now with the way our retirement accounts are going!

Greed does not consider giving away its abundance. The Rich Fool simply wants to build bigger barns to hoard. It never crosses his mind that he has been given this abundance to share with others. When you seek life in your possessions, giving away abundance is at least difficult and possibly even repulsive. Sometimes it doesn't even enter your mind. If it does, you find ways to justify keeping it for yourself. Greed ultimately isolates you from others in one way or another. They are after what you have. Greed is suspicious. You become lonely, anxious, and a broken

person. You have gained the whole world in one sense but you have lost your own soul.

The Cure for Greed

Greed, like the other sins, has a cure. The medicine must be taken daily, but it will hold at bay the deadly symptoms of greed. There are several virtues that must be cultivated in our lives if we are to keep the weeds of greed at bay.

Mercy

One characteristic of Greed, whether seen in the miser or the prodigal, is that it always seeks to possess. It is not at all about generosity or liberality. It is about getting. Deliberately demonstrating mercy to others will keep greed in its cage. Paul deals with this in 1 Timothy 6.17-19. There we see again that Paul does not condemn rich people for being rich, nor does he say that possessions are evil in themselves. Being wealthy is not evil. God made many men wealthy in the Scriptures. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Solomon are just a few. God promises wealth to covenant-keepers in Deuteronomy 28. These are blessings of the covenant. But the wealthy are exhorted and warned. They are not to be haughty. That is, they are not to believe themselves above everyone else because of their wealth. They are not to set their hopes in uncertain riches. Unlike the Rich Fool they are not believe that their hope is in what they have. Instead they are to keep their hope in God. They have been blessed by God with these possessions and they are to be enjoyed. God has given us all things richly to enjoy. Enjoy what you have. Enjoy your possessions.

But this is just the thing, isn't it? Greed can't enjoy anything because it can never be satisfied. You can only enjoy your possessions if they are not your ultimate desire. How do you know that they have not usurped God? If you can show mercy with what you have. What the rich are supposed to do is to see their abundance as an opportunity to be rich in good works. Mercy is to characterize our lives. They are to be using their money for others. By doing this they store up treasures that will last. In showing mercy in this way they also assure themselves that they are not in the clutches of greed. Greed is terribly self-centered, self-consumed. Acts of mercy force us outside of our self-interested cocoon to see and help meet the needs of others. When we do so we are doing battle with the sin of Greed.

Contentment

Mercy helps keep greed at bay, but we should also be cultivating contentment in our lives. Paul tells Timothy that godliness with contentment is great gain. In other words, you are a rich man if you are content. Paul says that if we have food and clothing, the basic necessities of life, with these things we should be content. How do we know when we are content? When we don't have to have. When we are not possessed with possessing. When we are satisfied and happy where we are and with what we possess. When we can look at advertisements and say, "That's nice, but no thanks."

No government programs, no change in our living conditions, no change in what we possess will give this to us. Willimon once again is helpful:

What we don't need is central economic planning or new laws, more taxes or fewer good-

paying jobs. What we need is something much more difficult to get than a Porsche—character. We need the sort of character that is able to look at the world and all it has to offer, and at certain key moments say simply, “Thank you, but I’m now satisfied.” (Willimon, 107)

Contentment has the uncanny ability to give thanks for what you have without any “buts.” “I thank you for all that I have, but I would really be content if I had _____.” Contentment is that disposition that is truly thankful and consequently joyful in whatever condition I find myself when my basic needs are met. I am not inordinately driven to possess to the point where I cannot be satisfied. I work diligently in order to be productive, but I am not consumed by consuming. Contentment is freedom; freedom from the tyrannous idols that drive us relentlessly to over work, over spend, and be overly consumed with how much I have in my bank account. Contentment is freedom from fear of losing it all. Contentment is the same if you are a millionaire or if you have little because contentment is not found in what a man possesses but by what a man is possessed. In order to counteract Greed that lies in our hearts, we must learn to say with Paul:

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Phil 4.10-13)

Greed, like all sin, will consume you until nothing is left but a flesh-less skeleton grasping coins. We Christians must fight Greed with the weapons of mercy and contentment.

Prayer: Almighty and most merciful God, grant me a heart that is satisfied in Christ.

THE VORACIOUS EYES OF GLUTTONY

Read: Num 11.4-23, 31-35; Matt 4.1-11; 1Tm 4.1-5

C. S. Lewis, in his series of books *The Chronicles of Narnia*, deals in some way in each of these seven books with the Seven Deadly Sins. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* gluttony comes to the fore in the person of Edmund. For those who might not have read the book, let me summarize what happens. Lucy, the youngest of four sisters, has found a magical wardrobe in the house of the Professor with whom they are staying during the war. When she enters that wardrobe, she finds, to her surprise, a whole new world: Narnia. She learns from Mr. Tumnus, a faun, that the reason it is perpetually winter in Narnia is because the White Witch rules Narnia. Lucy eventually returns to the wardrobe, goes back into the house, and tells her siblings about her discovery. They do not believe her. Through a series of events, Edmund, Lucy’s older brother, goes through the wardrobe himself and enters into Narnia. He meets the white witch the first time he goes into Narnia. She knows that the prophecy speaks of two sons of Adam and two daughters of Eve who will come and rule Narnia, thus, expelling her. So, she begins to work her enchantments upon Edmund to lure him and his siblings to certain death by

her hand.

How does she begin? She begins by asking him what he would like to eat. He replies that he would love some Turkish Delight. She gladly provides it for him. Then Lewis writes:

At last the Turkish Delight was all finished and Edmund was looking very hard at the empty box and wishing that she would ask him whether he would like some more. Probably the Queen knew quite well what he was thinking; for she knew, though Edmund did not, that this was enchanted Turkish Delight and that anyone who had once tasted it would want more and more of it, and would even, if they were allowed, go on eating it till they killed themselves.

After this the Queen promises Edmund all the Turkish Delight he would like if he will bring his three siblings to her house. As the story goes, Edmund betrays his own siblings for his craving for Turkish Delight. What begins with something seemingly so innocent and harmless as a craving for a sweet, eventually leads to the death of Aslan. O, how one out-of-control craving for food dictates the course of history!

The Character of Gluttony

Appetite: The virtuous host of Gluttony

As I hope that you have learned so far, whenever we sin, we should ask, “What righteous quality is this distorting and perverting?” Sin does not exist on its own but feeds off of a righteous quality, distorting and perverting it. Gluttony is no different. Gluttony takes the God-given appetites of man, especially for food, and twists them so that food becomes an idol that brings death to the worshiper. Our appetites in themselves are part of us as God created us. As Alexander Schmemmann says in his book *For the Life of the World*, God created man “a hungry being and the whole world as his food.” (11) Gluttony, therefore, is *not* a mere appetite for food. When God created the man and the woman, just after he blessed them and told them to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth and subduing it, he then told man, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food” (Gen 1.29). God wants man to eat. He commands man to eat. Food and the appetite which craves it is a gift of God. It is through the food and our appetite for it that we realize our creatureliness and dependence upon our Creator. It is through food that we have communion with God. Schmemmann is helpful once again when he says,

In the Bible the food that man eats, the world of which he must partake in order to live, is given to him by God, and it is given as *communion with God*. The world as man’s food is not something “material” and limited to material functions, thus different from, and opposed to, the specifically ‘spiritual’ functions by which man is related to God. All that exists is God’s gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man’s life communion with God. It is divine love made food, made life for man. God *blesses* everything He creates, and, in biblical language, this means that He makes all creation the sign and means of His presence and wisdom, love and revelation: “O taste and see that the Lord is good.”(14)

The indispensable nature of food to our relationship with God should be self-evident throughout the history of God's people. God prescribes food for his worship in the Tabernacle and Temple. They were grilling meat every day on the altar that would be eaten by God, the priests, and the people. The liturgical calendar of the Old Covenant was set according to Feasts before YHWH. Three major feasts were requisite upon the men of Israel to attend on a yearly basis. The people were required to spend their tithes at certain times of the year on feasting. Even if they could not make it to the Tabernacle or the Temple, they were to buy any food and drink their hearts craved and they were to celebrate before YHWH with it (cf. Dt 14.22ff.). One of the reasons given by YHWH himself as to why he wants his people to be set free from Egypt is that they may go and hold a feast to him (cf. Ex 5.1). The kingdom of God as the prophets prophesied and as Jesus embodied it is a feast (cf. e.g., Isa 25; Gospels). Jesus feasted with people so much that his critics accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton (cf. Matt 11.19). Rarely are we, his disciples, accused of this: that we party too much with food and drink.

Gluttony is not the sin of having an appetite or even of eating and drinking often and much. And the answer to Gluttony is not the rejection of certain foods and drinks. 1 Timothy 4.1-5 speaks to this very issue in the strongest of terms. Paul is writing to his pastoral apprentice, Timothy, instructing him how to live as a pastor and how to direct the church of Jesus Christ. Timothy must know that there is an apostasy coming. There will be a time when people will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful teachings and teachings of demons. How horrible this must be! What kind of deceitful teaching would lead to apostasy, a falling away from the faith. Surely Paul must be talking about denying the deity of Christ or the denial of justification by faith alone. Nothing in the text about either one of these, though he deals with those elsewhere. The teachers are forbidding marriage and teaching abstinence from certain foods! While we may kind of yawn at this, Paul calls these the doctrines of demons and says that these are signs of apostasy. Paul does not say, "These people are a little off but generally okay." He says that they are apostates. Paul is fighting what was and remains a huge problem in the church: the belief that the physical world as the physical world (i.e., creation, 'material' things) is at odds with our relationship with God. Certain foods, sex, and the cravings for them are evil in themselves. Paul affirms the continuing goodness of creation. Everything created by God is good and *nothing* to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. It is sanctified, made holy, by God's word (i.e., by his declaring it good) and prayer (i.e., the giving of thanks for it). People who reject certain types of foods or drinks as evil and as contrary to our relationship with God are teaching the same thing the church of Satan teaches. That is essentially what Paul is saying. You are definitely not super-spiritual then if reject certain types of food or if you believe alcohol is evil itself. The answer to gluttony is not avoiding good food, wine, beer, or whiskey. I agree with Mark Twain's sentiments when he lamented the houses where there were six Bibles and no corkscrews. Don't reject God's good gifts in the name of avoiding gluttony. Proper ingestion of God's good creation is righteous. Rejection of it can be a rejection of the faith itself.

Gluttony: Obsession with food

With all of this talk about food and feasting, is gluttony even a possibility? I mean, if we are supposed to be eating and drinking all of these things, and are cravings or appetites for them are God-given, then is gluttony possible? Yes, it is possible. Well then, how do we know that we are being gluttonous? What constitutes the sin of Gluttony? I believe that Paul once again begins to give us an idea of what constitutes Gluttony in 1 Corinthians 6.12. There Paul says, "All

things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be enslaved by anything." Gluttony consists in being mastered by your cravings. You don't control your cravings. They control you. You are a slave to your appetites.

Numbers 11 gives us a living, vivid illustration of just what Gluttony is and what it generates. There we find the children of Israel not long after they left Sinai. They arrived at Sinai in Exodus 19 and left there two years later in Numbers 10. Many things had happened during this time. They had seen God's provision for them in a number of ways. God spoke to them from the mountain, took them as his bride, renewed the covenant with them after they broke it, and prepared a tent for them where they would draw near to him. But they also experienced God's provision of food; something that had been the case even before they arrived at Sinai. God provided manna for them on a daily basis and even some quail on occasion (cf. Ex 16).

As Moses teaches about this later in Deuteronomy, he tells the people of Israel that YHWH was testing them. YHWH allowed them to hunger and fed them with manna in the wilderness so that they would know that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Food was a test; just like it was back in the beginning of creation with Adam and Eve. The question was and remains, Will your cravings control you, or will you control them in obedience to God? Israel fails the food test in Num 11. They moan and groan about their horrible situation and having to eat this manna all of the time. They remember the good ol' days in Egypt where they had food in abundance and it cost them nothing. They want meat.

YHWH is enraged at them. You might think that he would say, "I'm not giving you anything you bunch of ingrates." But he does something worse: he gives them over to what they crave. When they are handed over to their cravings, it brings about their deaths. The place where they bury the bodies is then named Kibroth-hattaavah, the graves of cravings. They dug their graves with their teeth. "Gluttony" forever remains the epithet on their headstones.

From this living and dying example in history we learn something about the features of our voracious enemy. First, we must note that Gluttony is characterized by *ingratitude*. It was not that the people did not have food. God faithfully provided food day-by-day for approximately two years up to this point and would continue to provide for thirty-eight more years. God provided manna. But they became bored with this food because they lost a sense of gratitude. You see, they deserved better. If you believe you deserve better, you will not be thankful for what you have. Instead you will be discontent and complaining that you want something else.

One of the manifestations of Gluttonous ingratitude is excessive picky-ness or finicky-ness about what you eat and drink; especially when it has been provided for you by someone else, whether through hospitality or your parents. This does not mean that it is evil to have a discriminating palate and prefer some foods and drinks above others. That is fine and good. For example, if you are a wine drinker, your palate will mature over the years (probably) until you like certain types of wine much more than others. That's fine. You are being prepared for the best wine that we will have one day in consummation of the kingdom (cf. Isa 25). But we can become snobs to the point that we refuse the graciousness of others because we simply cannot abide such crass food and drink that is below our standards. That is the ingratitude of the Glutton.

This is the child who sits down to what his mother worked diligently to prepare and refuses to eat it because he doesn't like it. And if mother gets up and says, "Let me fix you something that you do like," she is fostering that ingratitude in the child. Catering to your children all of the time, only fixing what they like or changing the menu for their cravings is teaching them to reject the hospitality of others. You are training them to be ingrates. I'm not

saying that you feed them things that they don't like all the time. I am saying that teaching them to eat things they don't prefer prepares them to be thankful to others when they provide food for them.

Of course, parents, this requires that we not be like this ourselves. We cannot very well train our children to do something that we ourselves are unwilling to do. Turning up your nose at what God has provided for you through the hands of others is an indication that you are controlled by your cravings for food. That is the sin of gluttony. Gluttony manifests itself in the inability to be content with what is provided; even if it is not your favorite.

The sin of gluttony, as we see from Numbers 11, also has the feature of *impatience*. The children of Israel cannot wait until the time when God would bring them into the Promised Land. At this particular point in the story, that would not have been too long. It is not until Numbers 13 and their rejection to fight giants in the land that they are consigned to thirty-eight more years of wilderness wandering. They want to go back to Egypt where their food was "free;" an interesting way to describe the food given to slaves.

The Glutton is obsessed with food to the point that he is focused only on himself and how fast he is able to get what he wants. He is obsessed with his cravings and does not care what it will cost him to have them. He is, as with all of the other sins, singularly focused upon himself. This feature of Gluttony is manifested in many ways, not the least of which is the manner in which we eat. The Glutton can't get food into his "pie hole" fast enough. If you speak to him at the table, he simply grunts at you with food hanging from his mouth. Many of us have lived through this in our own lives when we were teenagers. (I speak mainly of the men.) Teenage boys are hungry all of the time. They have voracious appetites. There is nothing wrong with that. They are growing. But that voracious appetite does not excuse acting like a pig at a trough when you get to the table. Slow down! Breathe! Take some time to savor the food, to enjoy the company, and to give thanks to others.

This is not just the sin of the teenage young man. It can happen to anyone who becomes consumed with food. This is one of many characteristics of the Glutton. As Henry Fairlie notes, "Gluttony does not give a particular value to anything it consumes. It does not savor. It only devours." (157) The Glutton does not take the time to appreciate the beauty of food, the time it took to prepare it, and the work that went into preparing it. He is only concerned with sitting down and stuffing his face; and it better be something that he likes!

Gluttony is isolating in its impatience. It is totally self-absorbed so that, even in the midst of a hundred people at a banquet table, it is all alone. Eating is generally a social event. From the beginning food was designed to be eaten with others. Eating food with others is communion. Because eating is generally as social event, cultures down through history have developed certain ways that we are to relate to one another at the table. These are the "manners" in which we are to relate to one another. We have simply shortened that to speak of having proper manners. Manners are developed in culture, not merely to be uppity, but to learn how to be graceful and considerate toward others. Manners asks: How do I make other people the most comfortable and at ease when eating with me? Manners are a form of service and deference to others.

The glutton doesn't care if he talks to you while eating; if he wants to talk at all. He doesn't care if he shows you what he is chewing because it is not about you but about him. But understand, while it may have looked good on the plate, it loses its aesthetics half-chewed in your mouth. The glutton cuts people off at the table and is focused on two things primarily: his food and how fast he can get that food from his plate to his mouth. All other things are incidental peripherals.

A third feature of our voracious enemy is *idolization*. The cravings of the children of Israel were a rejection of YHWH their God according to Numbers 11.20. They turned food into an idol. When they did so, when they allowed their cravings to control them, they rejected their God. The most obvious form of this, and the one with which we most associate gluttony, is obsessing with the quantity of food. It is over-indulgence. You just can't get enough and you can't get it often enough. This doesn't mean that you can't eat large amounts of food. I always love it when people self-righteously look at your plate and say, "Your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit!" This is obviously used by people who know very little about Temple worship and the large amounts of food and drink that were consumed there. It is not the amount of food necessarily. Two people can get the exact same amount of food on their plates and one be a glutton and the other not. It is not the amount of food but the obsession with it that constitutes gluttony.

A most obvious example of this is found in ancient Rome as depicted in Petronius' work *Satyricon*. There he depicts the Gluttony characteristic of Rome at that time by telling of Trimalchio's lavish banquets. There were overloaded tables, appalling manners, and disgusting vomitoriums (i.e., where people could go and regurgitate the food they just ate so that they would have room for more). One Roman senator had slaves walking backward in front of him to hold his paunch. (Guinness, 212) This is surely an extreme example, but we see this to lesser degrees when the Glutton races to the front of the food line, making sure that he gets first dibs on the fried chicken. Or maybe he takes inordinate amounts of food at a social gathering, not considering that others behind him might want some as well. Gluttons don't want to share. When they do, they are always looking to see if they have the biggest pieces or if their plate weighs more than the one with whom they are sharing. They want more, and too much is never enough.

These are obvious forms of Gluttony. And all the skinny people say, "Amen! Preach it brother!" But idolization of food is not confined to over-indulgence in quantity of food. The idolization of food can also be seen in being obsessed with what we might call the *quality* of food. It can be said that Gluttony is not just the sin of the pig but also of the prig. Being overly priggish about food so that everything must be "just so" is no less an idolization of food than the guy swigging down beer and wolfing down five dozen chicken wings at the local bar.

C. S. Lewis captures this well in his famous work *The Screwtape Letters*. Screwtape is writing to Wormwood about his patient's mother. She is consumed with what Lewis describes as "delicacy." He says of her that her quantities are small, but no one can ever fix her tea or her toast "just right." As such, "She is a positive terror to hostesses and servants." (*Joyful Christian*, 158-9) She is as unconcerned about how her consumption of food affects others as much as the over-indulgent. It just shows a different face. She is still obsessed with food.

This idolization of food appears in our culture in the new morality which is defined by food. Gluttony is surely a sin in our culture, but it has been redefined and thus refocused. We are obsessed with the amounts that we eat, what we eat, how big or how small our waistlines are. Dieting is a multi-billion dollar business. We may not wolf down pounds of pork, but we are obsessed with organic and health foods to the point that food controls our thoughts all of the time. And if you eat the wrong things, you are "bad." This is seen in something as seeming innocent as joking around about eating dessert. "I was so bad today. I had a piece of chocolate cake." Things are labeled as "sinfully delicious," as if you could go to hell for eating doughnut! This has become a religion in our society. Health foods are our new sacraments and the aerobic instructors are our new priests. The bishops of health hold regular ecumenical councils and determine the laws of ideal body weights and what types of foods we are to eat and what types of

foods we are to avoid. We simply kneel and kiss their no-fat, non-caloric, low-carb ring and pay homage to all of their rules; rules, by the way, which may change tomorrow because of some new piece of evidence. Today caffeine is going to kill you tomorrow. Tomorrow caffeine actually promotes long life.

Os Guinness describes this whole state of affairs well when he says, “The weekly Weight Watchers weigh-in has replaced the Catholic confessional as the prototypical act of self-disclosure.” (215) You hear us confessing, “Forgive me scale for I have sinned. I ate a real Twinkie, not one of those cardboard Smart-Ones look-alike.”

This religion creates self-righteous worshipers. We look at people who are a little lumpy and immediately assume that they are lazy, lack self-control, or have some emotional problem. Maybe they are this way. But maybe they aren't. Excessive fat could be due to a number of issues. You may not have the whole picture. Not everyone is going to look like the photo-shopped model on the front of magazine covers. This religion has enslaved us. We are frightened to be looked down upon because we eat this or that. We fall into all kinds of eating disorders because of it. Anorexia and bulimia, both serious disorders that can lead to death, are the extreme consequences of this obsession with the idol of food. That which should be a joy to us has been turned into a burden. Once again Guinness nails this on the head: “Obsession with various forms of non-eating is trendy, but just as gluttonous as obsession with eating—especially to Christian believers whose anticipated joy in a heavenly banquet will surely be oblivious to whether the bread has butter or margarine on it and the milk is 98 percent fat-free.” (Guinness, 215)

No matter in which manner food is being idolized, whether it be in the over-eater or in the cult of health food, each Glutton is seeking salvation through food; whether through finding life in over-indulgence or through eating only certain types of foods. We as Americans are striving for “perfect health.” As such we are looking for the resurrection of the body through what we eat or what we avoid eating. Nevertheless, we will be saved through food. When we become ill, we puzzle over it because we eat all the right things and exercise regularly; just like the bishops told us to do. The bishops of health, though, do not acknowledge what we Christians know to be true: sin still makes our bodies mortal. Death is working in us. We will not attain perfect health through eating rice cakes and legumes all the time. Now, I am not saying that you should throw off all concern over your diet and exercise. I am saying that you should not be obsessed with it thinking that your life will be saved or lost depending upon whether or not you follow the regimen. I agree with Augustine: care for your body as if you were going to live forever; care for your soul as if you were going to die tomorrow.

Ultimately, as with all of these sins, gluttony is a *failure of faith*. It is a failure to believe God, trusting him for proper provision of all things. It is a fear that God may not give us what we need even though we pray with the assurance of his promise, “Give us this day our daily bread.” It is a failure of faith inasmuch as it is a failure to enjoy that which is lawful; to enjoy the good gifts of God.

The Cure for Gluttony

There is hope for the Glutton. There is a cure. As with the others the medicine must be applied daily, sometimes several times a day, but we, as Christians, need not live under the power of sin.

In Matthew 4, we read of Jesus, who embodies the mission of Israel, succeeding where Israel failed. The first test/temptation of Jesus was a food test. After fasting for forty days, Jesus

was hungry. Satan came and tempted him to turn stones into bread. Jesus' hunger was a legitimate need and craving. The question is, Will he be controlled by his cravings and thus reject the promise of his Father? Would he be grateful and patient, waiting upon his Father's provision, or would he be dissatisfied and grasp at things before the time he was supposed to have them? Jesus passed the test. He conquered his cravings as he quoted and lived out what was said by Moses: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." In this story we see the multi-faceted cure for gluttony.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a recurring theme in the cure for many of these sins. In order to combat the sin of gluttony, there must be gratitude for what God has provided which reveals itself with a content with and in the present situation. Gratitude is a proper appreciation for the gifts of God. When you give thanks to God for them, you are realizing in word and deed that you are dependent ultimately upon him, not only the dead food that you are about to eat. Gratitude keeps you in proper relationship to food, which, like money, is a great servant but a harsh master.

Cravings for God himself controlling us

The next aspect of the cure for gluttony is that our cravings for God himself must control us. We must be obsessed with him. Here is a little test: Can you laid aside certain pleasures and even bodily necessities for a time when your vocation calls for it? This is precisely what Jesus did. There is nothing wrong with eating. Jesus did it often. But there was a time when he had to lay it aside because his mission demanded it. His mission was more important than the cravings of his body at the moment. This is one reason why I believe occasional fasting is a good discipline. Lent gives us an opportunity to do that together (although it is not obligatory upon anyone). As Christians we have a mission to die so that the world might live. Fasting emphasizes that mission. Fasting helps us to focus on our vocation, realizing that life is not ultimately found in food itself but in the God who provides it.

Understand that mere denial of the flesh is not the answer to gluttony. Unbiblical prohibitions can turn into pride and other sorts of excesses that feed off of gluttony. Paul deals with this in part in Colossians 2 where he says that self-denial, asceticism, has a show of wisdom, but it is of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. Denial of our legitimate cravings or trying to squash those cravings as if they are the problems themselves only inflames the cravings because you are still consumed by thoughts of food. Biblical fasting is a denial of our legitimate cravings, recognizing that they are legitimate, done for the purpose of our vocation as Christians. It is not done to squash the desire for food or to make our waistlines smaller. Biblical fasting is a form of prayer in which denial of our cravings serves the purpose of serving others. In this it is the opposite of all forms of gluttony. The answer to Gluttony is to have a greater vocation that is more than satisfying our own cravings. This vocation must be defined by God himself. This vocation is serving our God, and we do that by serving others.

Faith

The last and most obvious aspect to the cure for gluttony is faith. It is believing God's promises of provision and that he is good and wants good for us. He is not denying us anything

that we need to be stingy or make us suffer just for the sake of suffering. It is believing that salvation is not found in what you consume or don't consume but in Christ alone. This frees you up to eat like you should and enjoy it; even that occasional decadent piece of cake. Faith keeps you from the fear of not having enough, knowing that when you pray as our Lord instructed us—"Give us this day our daily bread"—that he will surely fulfill this petition.

The Glutton, whether he is found at the table gorging himself with everything he can possibly get into his mouth as fast as he can or whether he is found eating rice cakes and reading every nutritional guide on everything he eats, is in danger. His obsession with food makes it into an idol, and idols only lead their worshipers to death. Our God gives us food to enjoy and as indicators that our lives are dependent ultimately upon him. May God save us from our sinful appetites.

Prayer: All-sufficient God, grant that I may find all of my cravings satisfied in you.

THE LONGING EYES LUST

Read: Gen 39.1-23; Matt 5.27-30; 1Cor 6.12-20

To say that our American culture is captivated by sex does not come as a news flash. We are inundated with sex on billboards while driving down the road, checking out at the grocery store, or even watching a TV commercial selling sandwiches. As the fire of lust burns, we move into greater and more shocking areas of sexual titillation. Not much can make us blush anymore, but advertisers and movie-makers continue to try by pushing the boundaries even further back. Our lust has created a culture in which sexual mores have changed drastically and now it seems odd, old-fashioned and prudish to look down on certain sexual expressions that, even in the wider culture, were once called sin. Now finding your sexual self and all sorts of deviant sexual behavior is simply looked upon as normal. According to some surveys, "About 65 percent of America's teens have sex by the time they finish high school, and teenage 'dating' websites ... encourage teenage patrons to select not prom dates but partners for casual sexual escapades. A 2002 study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that 41 percent of American women aged fifteen to forty-four have, at some point, cohabited with a man. According to the 2000 census, the number of unmarried couples living together has increased tenfold between 1960 and 2000, and 72 percent between 1990 and 2000. Fifty-two percent of American women have sex before turning eighteen, and 75 percent have sex before they get married." (Lauren Winner, *Real Sex*, 16)

The Christian church is hardly immune to this. Frequently we hear of another high profile leader in the church falling into some sort of sexual sin. Denominational lines are not respected in this matter either. It matters not if you are Protestant or Catholic. In 1992 *Christianity Today* surveyed over 1000 of its readers. Forty percent said that they had engaged in pre-marital sex. Fourteen percent said that they'd been unfaithful to their spouses; seventy-five percent of which were Christians at the time (Winner, *Real Sex*, 18). You really don't need all of these numbers to tell you how serious the problem with sexual sin is. You experience the struggles yourself and have seen friends and family devastated by infidelity. At the heart of all these statistics and life experiences lies that burning fire of lust. As is evident in the wider culture and as you know from seeing the effects of many sexual sins, Lust is truly a deadly sin.

We have now come to the last of the Seven Deadly Sins. I think it is the last of the sins,

not because of its priority in the pecking order of sins, but because we pastors are uncomfortable talking about such things to our congregations. But if the apostle Paul did it (and he did), then we ought to as well. The wrong type of silence from the church on this matter contributes to the problem. So, now we turn our attention to that seemingly insatiable fire that burns within and will, if not doused, lead to our deaths: lust.

The Character of Lust

Sexual Desire: The virtuous host

Lust is not confined to sexual sin because lust is simply *desire*. We may lust for power, for food, for money and such the like. But many of those things have been dealt with in our other studies of the Seven Deadly Sins. Our focus will be upon lust as sexual desire, which is the way it has been understood historically as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. As with the words *envy* and *anger*, the word itself does not tell you whether or not it is a virtue or a vice. The context determines the meaning. This goes to the very nature of sin itself. Sin, as I have been emphasizing throughout, is not original. Sin has no life on its own. It feeds off of righteous; attaching itself to a righteous trait, seeking to kill it and leaving it maimed, twisted, distorted, and perverted. Lust, as we generally understand it, is a twisted and distorted God-given quality. Sexual desire is a good thing created in us by God from the beginning. It is not evil in itself. In fact, it is a necessary aspect of man as God's image fulfilling his original vocation of taking dominion of the earth. When God blessed man in the beginning, the first words we hear spoken to man by God are "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1.28). As one author said, when God blessed and commanded the man and woman to "be fruitful and multiply, he did not mean for them to go learn their multiplication tables! (Kreeft, 167). The man and woman were created in the way that they were created to desire and act out the most intimate of relations with one another. Sexual desire and the act of sex itself is a good creation of God and not to be despised. In fact, the Christian church is the place where people should learn about the goodness and the joys of this gift of God.

Through our knowledge of the way the human body works and what makes it up, we have reduced sex merely to a physical act. This is one of the reasons, I believe, that sex is treated in such a cavalier fashion. It is no different for people from playing basketball, running, or some other form of exercise. It is just another physical function. This is the attitude that comes from a culture that doesn't understand or rejects God's Word as that which defines life. Sexual relations are not merely "physical" as opposed to "spiritual" (as if anything in life—even physical exercise—could be reduced and compartmentalized into such categories). Sexual relations are the principle means by which a man and a woman become one flesh. Yes, that involves a physically intimate union, but it involves the entire person of those involved. This union exceeds our ability to describe what is happening. Paul says in Ephesians 5 that this one flesh union is a mystery. Even people who take a cavalier attitude toward sex understand this. A man doesn't tell his wife that he had sex with another woman in the same way that he tells her he went out for a jog. We instinctively know that there is more to this intimacy than the mere physical act itself.

The fact that this union goes beyond the mere physical act is also seen in what it is intended to produce: children. Through this union of (what is supposed to be) self-giving love, in general circumstances, children who will exist from the time of conception through eternity, are

produced. They are living beings whose lives, whether in the body or not, will never cease to live. God intended from the beginning that sexual desire and relations would be good, enjoyable, and fruitful. The Bible tells us in other places that these desires are good. In Proverbs 5 when Solomon is instructing his son how to avoid harlot folly, he says that he is to be enraptured with the love of his wife and be satisfied with her body. The Song of Solomon describes the relationship of the king with his people in terms of husband and wife and the beautiful intimacy they enjoy in that relationship. The book is filled with very descriptive aspects of this intimate relationship. YHWH and Israel in the Old Covenant and Jesus and the Church in the New Covenant become “one flesh.” This descriptive of what happens with the man and the woman in the Garden and subsequently what happens in every marriage when it is consummated. When YHWH speaks about taking Israel under the wing of his garment, which is realized when Israel comes under YHWH’s tent, the Tabernacle, this marital intimacy again describes his relationship with his people.

God is not against sexual desire or sex itself. He created it and it is good just as all things God created. But it is only good—i.e., properly life-giving—when it is left within the context for which God created it. That context is within the bonds of the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman; not by yourself, not with some figure in a magazine or on the internet, not with another person of the opposite sex before marriage or while married to another person, not with another person of the same sex, and not with animals (all of which God strictly forbids in his Word). While many people think that God’s boundaries on sexual relations are too restrictive, not giving us enough “freedom,” and trying to squelch our fun, we need to understand that the way God designed us and instructs us in the area of sexual desire is for our good and ultimate pleasure. God’s design for one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage—what we would call chastity—is God’s best for us. It is here that we find true freedom and fulfillment.

Please note that I did not say that sexual desire and sex itself cannot be *fun* outside of marriage. It can be. And if people tell you that it can’t be, they are lying to you. As the writer of Hebrews says, there is pleasure in sin for a season. It is only for a season, but there is still pleasure. I said that outside of its proper context sexual desire and sex itself is not *good* and is not ultimately fulfilling. In fact, it is destructive.

Parents, when teaching your children about these issues (and you should consciously and deliberately teach them about these issues when you deem they are of the proper age to handle the subject) don’t lie to your children about what will happen if they have sex before marriage. Don’t tell them that things will rot off of their bodies or that it is no pleasure in it at all. If they discover that these things are not true, they will wonder what else you have lied to them about. Also, don’t simply give them the rules about proper sexual expression but give them the rationale behind the rules. They need to know why they need to save themselves for marriage and keep this intimacy between them and their future spouses. Understand, parents, that you will not be able always to shield your children from all the images that will war against them in this area. That is why your teaching needs to go beyond the rules to the rationale. Teach them how to deal with these things while their at home instead of waiting for them to come out from under your over-protection and not knowing how to think through these issues for themselves. (I hope you understand that this doesn’t mean, expose them to everything and let them explore and be inundated with sexual stuff. That is not what I’m saying. I’m saying that as you encounter it in the culture, deal with it by teaching them along the way. And, not so incidentally, you begin teaching them how to control their desires when they are a toddler, not when they reach puberty. Sexual desire is another craving of the body like other desires that need to be held in check.

When you teach your toddler to control his anger, you are also teaching him how to control all of his desires, including his sexual desire. Self-control is not confined to one area of his life. This training begins early, long before you must have “the talk” with them.)

So, let’s understand what Lust is *not*. Lust is not sexual desire in itself. That is created by God and is good when left within its God-ordained context. Neither is lust the appreciation of the beauty of another person. Some people are attractive. The Bible recognizes this and emphasizes it at times. For example, Joseph is described as handsome in form and appearance (Ge 39.6). Joseph was a “looker;” a head-turner. Appreciating the beauty of the appearance of another person is not problematic. When we see beauty, we ought to be sensitive to it. Our God is beautiful and creates beautiful things. When we recognize the qualities of beauty in someone, we are seeing reflections of our Creator. Not appreciating beauty is the product of insensibility. Being insensitive to beauty can be the product of sloth or even the end result of lust. Through these things we can become indifferent and desensitized respectively.

Lust: Idolized sexual desire

When “appreciating beauty” becomes an obsession with the desire for someone else, someone who does not rightfully belong to you, then you have fallen into the fiery arms of lust. As Peter Kreeft points out, “... [N]ot noticing [beauty] is a form of insensibility. Unfortunately, the leap between noticing and lusting, between the first and the second look is often small and easily made.” (Kreeft, 168) Man twists the righteous desire given to him by God that is necessary to the fulfilling of his vocation by making an idol out of it. In C. S. Lewis’s work, *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape writes to Wormwood summarizing how their Enemy, God himself, is the Creator of these pleasures and they the perverters:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy’s ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. (Lewis, *The Joyful Christian*, 151-2)

Man takes one of the greatest expressions of love, believing that God puts too many constraints on him, and insists that life can be found in this apart from the boundaries of God’s Word. This is the essence of idolatry: trying to find life in the creation of God. Man believes that these constraints restrict our freedom. So, in our culture we have declared our commitment to “free love” (nomenclature of the 1960’s that has come to its full flower child in our day). “Free love” is somewhat of the mantra for lust. And it is in this very concept that lust begins to reveal its true colors. “Free love” is a contradiction. Love costs. Love is self-sacrificing. Love is not free. Self-centered, self-consumed lust refuses to believe this, understanding the word *love* to mean *lust*.

Lust is sexual desire that is out-of-control. Lust is sexual desire that refuses to pay heed to the sexual boundaries God has established. Lust is seen in living color in Genesis 39, where, from the outset, one of the cultural myths about lust is summarily shot down; namely that lust is the sin of men only. Don’t get me wrong, men do have problems with lust. But it is a lie to believe that men are pigs and women have no problems with lust. Women can and do have

problems with lust. Because lust is revealed differently in women does not make it any less a problem.

Men and women have complimentary problems with lust. It is no secret that men want women. We can see this in numerous places all around us. Men are appealed to through half-dressed women much more than women are appealed to with half-dressed men. Men want women. The compliment to this in women is that women want to be wanted. They want to be desired by other men. Men are prone to want to look at women, and women are prone to give men something to look at. This is seen in Proverbs 7 with harlot folly in how she dresses and makes up herself and how aggressive she is with the young man. She wants to be desired.

Men, your primary focus needs to be on your wife. While you may appreciate the beauty of other women, do not become focused upon other women. Be consumed with her love. Women, don't encourage your brothers to stumble through the way that you dress. When you over accentuate your particularities as a woman, you are doing so because you want to be noticed. You want to be desired. You are not naive. If you didn't care about being noticed in this way, you would wear a potato sack.

Harlot Folly dresses a certain way. As much as women want to rationalize that this is "the style" or "fashion," Christian women have a responsibility to dress appropriately; not just to keep other men from lusting (which as we will see later is not the ultimate cause), but because you should not be caught in the grips of lust yourself. Ladies, if you go to the store and pick up a shirt that looks like an infant's onesy or a sock with a few extra holes added to it so that when you put it on it stretches over your body so that nothing is left to the imagination, it is probably too tight. I'm not speaking against dressing attractively. I believe you should. Dressing attractively is not the same thing as overly accentuating your features or dressing seductively.

Husbands and fathers, help your wives and your daughters in this area. Put yourself in the place of other men who will see them out in public. If you saw another woman dressed this way, what would you think? And if you want your wife or your daughters to be desired in this way, you've got a serious problem.

Neither men nor women need to encourage lust. There will be enough of it without further stoking of the fire. It is this fire that needs to be subdued and kept within its proper boundaries. From all three of our passages of Scripture you were encouraged to read at the onset of this chapter, we learn about the character of this fire and what it looks like when it gets out of control. In Genesis 39 we begin to learn about the character of lust as it is manifested in Potiphar's wife. One thing that stands out in the passage as a characteristic of lust is that *lust is a liar*. Potiphar's wife, when seeking to protect herself after stripping the coat from Joseph, lies about what really happened. She is not worried about what will happen to Joseph because of her lies. She wants to get back at Joseph for his spurning of her advancements. In this we see the image of the idol being reflected in its worshiper. Lust itself (like other sins) is a liar. Paul, in Ephesians 4.22, calls lusts "deceitful." That is, out-of-bounds desires lie to you. They promise that which they cannot deliver. Lust promises satisfaction but can never deliver on those promises. As Doug Wilson says in his book *Fidelity*: "Here is the problem: Lust demands from a finite thing (sexual pleasure) what only the Infinite can provide..." Like greed and gluttony that which lust consumes in order to be satisfied only fuels the fire, making it grow stronger, larger, and hotter. But it is still a wild fire.

Sexual desire not brought under control will never be satisfied and will lead to greater and more insidious acts of sexual deviancy. Lust always looks for that life it seeks in the next experience of pushing the sexual envelope. Lust can no longer be satisfied with the last sexual

experience. The next one has to be greater, more thrilling, and the experience of a lifetime. Our media fuels this false notion by portraying in film and books that it certainly can be this way. Lust is a liar, and these lies will continue to lead you down a path until you are used up, wasted, completely unsatisfied, and eventually dead.

This can happen in marriages as well as other contexts. Treating one another as merely tools for self-gratification will eventually become dissatisfying. You will not be able to do enough tricks for one another. You will have to go beyond the bounds of your marriage because you are too restricted and it just isn't exciting anymore. The theme song for lust is performed by the Rolling Stones: *I Can't Get No Satisfaction* (which in proper grammar would mean that you actually could ... but I digress).

We are bombarded with the belief that our lust and sexual exploration and exploits make us stronger sexual beings. But the truth is that we are maimed in the ability to be sexually satisfied. Lust is a liar. Those who worship this idol bear its image. People will lie to spouses, friends, and family about their "affairs" (a damnable euphemism for sexual immorality. But you see if we rename it makes it more palatable, taking the sting out of it.).

Closely associated with the lying characteristic of lust is the fact that *lust is self-consumed, not worrying about how its actions destroy others*. One of the beauties of marital intimacy is that, as Ben Patterson describes, in the mystery of God's love no one can figure out who is doing the giving and who is doing the receiving. It simply all blends together. (quoted by Rich Lusk in his sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins) Not so with lust. Lust is self-consumed; something again shown in Potiphar's wife. She only cares about her self-gratification. When she is spurned she seeks to destroy Joseph through her lies. She doesn't care what her sexual liaison with Joseph will do to her marriage with Potiphar. She doesn't care the consequences that Joseph will face. She doesn't even care that she herself might be punished or possibly put to death with Joseph. She is consumed with what she wants and doesn't care about the destruction that it brings.

In our society we hear it this way: "What I do in private is no one else's business." We have heard that from a President down to our next door neighbor. This is how we deal with people and their pesky morality that they want to impose on all of us. But what you do in private is my business; and not only mine but the church's and the society at large. For one thing, your private sexual activity may produce children. Those children must be cared for and brought up in this society. Their rearing will shape the way our entire society is in the future. Our sin of lust has led to the slaughter of millions of children in the wombs of their mothers. This is the deadly answer to our problem with lust. What you do in private may destroy the life of another human being and will shape the way that the rest of the culture begins to view life.

But this problem is eliminated through birth-control. So, we are not bothering anyone. Children not being produced is also a problem. This creates people—very public people—who live only for their own pleasures and not for others. They want the rewards of commitment without actually having to be committed. What we do in the privacy of our bedrooms shapes us as public people. It cannot be compartmentalized. Fairlie once again helps us to understand this when he says:

There is no more pat shibboleth of our time than the idea that what consenting adults do in private is solely their own business. This is false. What we do in private has repercussions on ourselves, and what we are and believe has repercussions on others. What we do in our own homes will inevitably affect, not only our own behavior outside

them, but what we expect and tolerate in the behavior of others, and what we expect the rulers of our societies to tolerate. (Fairlie, 184)

Because what you do in private shapes who you are and, thus, the way a community thinks and acts, it is the church's and the State's business the way you conduct your sexual life.

What we do "privately" is now translated into "whatever I want to do, even if it is in front of you." And if a person is called down because it, it is "none of his business." Lauren Winner writes:

Americans consider sex a fine topic of public disclosure but we insist that sex is also private, nobody's business but mine and the person with whom I'm doing it. I can show you my midriff in public, and I can make out with my boyfriend on a park bench, but there is no communal grammar that allows you to talk to me about this body I am exposing in front of you. (Winner, 46-7)

Lust is self-consumed. All it thinks about is what it wants at the time. It is not concerned about how its attitudes and actions affect other people.

Lust also desires an aspect of oneness without the commitment of oneness. Potiphar's wife simply wants Joseph to "lie with" her. She only sees Joseph as good-looking young man and a potential good time. But in this act, we learn from 1 Corinthians 6.16, that you become one flesh with the other person. The problem is, this is the only aspect of oneness that lust desires. This is what constitutes it as lust and differentiates it from love. Love involves commitment which is found in the bonds of a covenant. Love stays with a person, giving oneself to the other person no matter how one may be feeling at the time or if one feels particular stimulations or not. Lust, like its siblings, is isolated and isolating. Lust cuts you off from other people. Others are only objects of my gratification. When they are not needed anymore or they have lost their usefulness to me, they are discarded like the latest edition of *Playboy* or *Sports Illustrated*, Swimsuit Edition.

Pornography and our obsession with it illustrates this. We don't have to have another "real" person there. Other people get in the way of our sexual pleasure. They have needs; needs with which we would rather not be bothered. I'm just concerned about my pleasure. Lust wants pleasure with no strings attached, but what it finds is a cage from which it cannot free itself. It wants no responsibility, only the pleasure.

Jesus teaches us about another characteristic of lust in the Sermon on the Mount: *the problem with Lust does not lie outside of us.* That is, the problem is not our environment (though many factors may exacerbate the problem). The problem is not in the signs of the highway (as seductive as they are becoming), the commercials on TV (as embarrassingly suggestive and explicit as they have become), the adult book store down the road (which is an interesting name for such juvenile material), or the magazines in the grocery store (which reveal more on their cover than pornography once revealed in its pages). The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Jesus makes that clear. He does not blame the lust of the man on the woman at whom he is looking but upon the man himself. She herself may look seductive, but ultimately the problem with lust is found in the one lusting.

This doesn't mean that these other things aren't sinful and don't need changing. But they only reflect what is in our hearts. They reflect our cravings as a society. They reflect our Lust. And when we take the time to gaze upon them and fantasize about them, that is revelation of our own sin. Surrounding yourself with these things all of the time can fan the flames. You should

not surround yourself with these things whether in the images you view, the songs you listen to, or books you read. But you cannot blame anything other than your own heart for desiring to step out of God's boundaries for sexual desire. Until we are willing to admit this about our lives, we will not be ready for the cure. Blaming others for my sin is not dealing with my sin.

The Cure for Lust

Once we admit that our own hearts are the problem, then we are ready for the cure for lust. Again, this is not a three-step program that will solve the problem with lust once and for all in your life. Life-long application of this medicine is the prescription.

Before I go any further, let's get something clear: chastity (i.e., staying sexually pure, keeping sex in its proper context) is not easy. As Lauren Winner candidly speaks, "Chastity is not always easy or fun... Which is to say that being chaste is sometimes strange, and difficult, and curious. But it is also a discipline, and like any spiritual discipline, it gets easier and better with time." (Winner, 14) I don't want to make this sound easy. Sexual sin is difficult to deal with, especially if you are trapped in it. Some of us have experienced some serious sexual problems in the past; whether they have been inflicted upon us or things in which we have entrapped ourselves. It is difficult to extract oneself when you get caught up in these sins. But this doesn't excuse us from trying and establishing disciplines in our lives in regards to this sin of lust. We can, and, as Christians, *we must!*

Flight

The first aspect of the cure for lust, and one that should be employed more than it is, is *flight*. Run! Joseph, when confronted with the temptation, ran, leaving his coat behind. He did not negotiate with this woman or ask her to pray with him about the matter. This is Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians: "Flee immorality" (1Cor 6.18). This is Paul's exhortation to Timothy: "Flee youthful lusts" (2Tm 2.22). Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is to get out of a place that will tempt you to lust. Don't play around with sin. Stay away from potentially compromising situations. Those situations may present themselves on the internet, in movies, in reading material, in pop songs that glorify sexual immorality, or in a myriad of other ways. As much as you can avoid it. Flee! Run! Don't stick around! Get out of there! (Got the point?!)

This also means that you keep your distance emotionally with people of the opposite sex with whom you are not married. This doesn't mean that you can't work with them. But it does mean that boundaries need to be set and vigorously maintained. Stay away from flirtatious people. Men, I know that flirting strokes your ego. She's interested. Women, you want him to desire you, though you may not *intend* it to go any further than that. It is playing around sexually. Can a person take fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Stay out of compromising situations as much as possible. And if you find yourself in the middle of one as Joseph did, RUN!

Fight

There is another way in which we must deal with lust: *fight*. Jesus says that if our eyes cause us to stumble, pluck them out. If our hands cause us to stumble, cut them off. We are to take aggressive action toward our sin. So many times people ask the wrong question when

coming to this passage: Did Jesus mean this literally or figuratively? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the interpretative question is wrong and wicked in itself. The point is to obey Jesus' command not to lust. Sometimes this might need to be taken literally in some sense. TV, internet, and such the like might need to be "cut off" if you cannot control your remote finger or your surfing.

This fight is also taken up in the pursuit of that which is righteous. After Paul tells Timothy to flee youthful lusts, he follows that up by saying "Pursue righteousness." It not just a negative command of "Stay away," but it is also positive, "Pursue what is right." Busy yourself with the right things so that you don't have time to dwell upon issues of lust.

You may also need some accountability; someone or a group who will hold your feet to the fire. It doesn't need to be the pastor or even an elder. But it does need to be someone who won't put up with your excuses as to why you keep doing the same things week after week. So many times accountability begins to mean, "This is where I go each week to confess that I am not doing what I'm supposed be doing, but I really don't have any intention to change." The confession in and of itself is *not* dealing with the problem as it should be. That is only part of it.

Another way to fight lust is to get married. This is what Paul instructs the Corinthians to do in 1Corinthians 7. It is better to marry than to burn with passion. It will not solve all of your problems, but it is a weapon against lust. If you are burning with sexual passion, you probably don't have the gift to remain single. So, find a spouse. Until then, you must keep your passion reined in in these other ways.

Fright

The last bit of medicine is *fright*. Be afraid, as Joseph was, of sinning against God. Love God so much that you are more concerned about sinning against him than you are about self-gratification. Be afraid that as a Christian when you are sexually immoral you are joining "a prostitute" to the body of Christ, as Paul says in 1Corinthians 6. Remember who you are. You are a member of Christ's body. Anyone with whom you have sexual relations you are joining to Christ's body. Be afraid of God's judgment as Jesus warns in Matthew 5. Jesus says that it is better to lose your eye or hand than to be cast into hell because you have given yourself over to lust. God does send people to hell for living lives of sexual immorality. This is one of the reasons the wrath of God falls upon the children of disobedience (cf. Eph 5.5-6). Be afraid. Fear God's judgment and put reigns on your sexual desire.

Prayer: Loving Father, grant that I may desire only and always that which you desire.

CONCLUSION

All of us are guilty of these sins and many of their children. We are sinners who fail miserably; many times over and over again despite our desires to the contrary. For you struggling sinners, for you who are fighting the good fight, you need to know that there is forgiveness for your sins and the promise of deliverance from their power. None of these sins is unpardonable. The only unpardonable sin is the one that refuses to accept God's gracious provision in Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sins at the cross and was raised again for our justification (Rom 4.25). In him we have the forgiveness of sins (Eph 1.7). If we will confess our sins, our God will be faithful and just to forgive us from our sins and cleanse us from all

unrighteousness (1Jn 1.9). We don't have to submit ourselves to the tyrannical death-reign of sin. In your baptism into Christ, you died to sin and its reign over your life (Rom 6.1ff). In your baptism God promises and truly offers you all the freedoms found in Christ Jesus our Lord. You need not be bound by any of these sins. Yes, you may still struggle with them. In fact, you will continue to struggle with them the rest of your life in some form or fashion. But it is a fight that you can ultimately win, not in your own power, but through all that Christ has provided by his Spirit and through his church. You will struggle, but you need not be in the grip of any of these. Our God has provided the cure. That cure is in Christ. As you appropriate what he has provided, walking by faith, you will be free; not completely sin-free, but free from the tyranny of sin.