

From Greed to Generosity

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 20th of March 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled From Greed to Generosity. Things that were not used.

\$10 billion we spent on things that we didn't use. We see it in a shop, it might be on special, a bargain. We buy it and it collects dust.

We don't use it. \$10 billion in Australia. And they say that's a very conservative estimate. You see, we live in a society whose motto is buy or die.

Or a motto that is greed is good. Greed is the seventh deadly sin in this series. It is the desire for more than is necessary.

[1 : 04] So whether it is cake or cars, whether it is cash or clothes, whether it's consumables or collectibles, greed is the desire for the accumulation of more than we need.

To earn more than we need. To own more than we need. To consume more than we need. To collect more than we need.

That's greed. And it's the aspiration of our world. Our world aspires, in effect, to greed. It's a high virtue in our society.

Indeed, in many respects, greed actually makes the world go round economically at least. In our capitalist society, it is, in a sense, kick-started by human greed.

Indeed, René Rifkin, now somewhat notorious, said that he who dies with the most toys wins. Well, I wonder what he's going to win at the end of his life.

[2 : 08] Not very much, I suspect. I wonder what he thinks he's winning now. Now, it is socially acceptable in our world to be greedy.

Not, of course, to be absolutely indulgently greedy like Imelda Marcos or Nick Leeson who brought down Bearings Bank through his own greed. But there is an element in which greed is actually fairly socially acceptable.

And indeed, in many respects, almost a virtue. Indeed, if you're not greedy, it's almost as though you're eccentric. So one man was highly honoured in the United States.

I can't remember his name. Aaron Firestein or something in recent years. Because he didn't actually pursue an insurance company for greed. But rather kept employing his employees, even though his factory had burnt down.

You see, our socially acceptable greed means that we stampede into Myers and DJs. It's on Boxing Day morning trying to pick up the bargains. It means that there are queues of people who are there for lottery tickets, week by week, trying to win their fortune.

[3 : 15] It's seen in the obsession that so many people in Australia in particular have with the share market. You don't get that obsession, it seems to me, in the United Kingdom where I've lived. But here, it seems to me, all the time there's share market news in the papers and on TV and on the radio news telling us whether we're making a fortune or not.

One of my sisters lives in Darwin. And you may know that a week or so ago, Cyclone Ingrid was floating around near Darwin. Cyclone Ingrid was estimated to be much more severe than Cyclone Tracy at one point, with winds over perhaps 300 kilometres an hour.

And so there were very clear, public, loud announcements on all the media in Darwin about how to brace yourself as a warning against this impending cyclone. Now, I don't know all the details of what that involved, but it certainly meant that people had to pick up everything that was loose in their garden, outside their house, and make sure that it was under their house or locked up or in a shed or whatever.

And if you had a little boat, then you were to fill it with water, so that the wind wouldn't actually lift it out of the water and fly it across the sky, which sounds a little bit bizarre, but I guess very strong winds will do that.

And there's a whole range of things that people in Darwin had to do. And my sister, who flew down on Sunday last week, or arrived on Sunday, was bemoaning the fact that in her haste, she hadn't actually done everything that she was meant to do around her house for this impending cyclone.

[4 : 41] The Bible is like giving us a cyclone warning on the issue of greed. Its warnings are strong, blunt, and clear.

Be on your guard, Jesus says, against all types of greed or covetousness. A very strong, unequivocal warning about the danger of greed.

It's as though greed is a cyclone bearing down upon us, and we're to stand guard against it. Jesus also said, what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul?

René Rivkin would do well to read those verses of Jesus in Luke chapter 9, for example. Jesus elsewhere says about a greedy person, You fool! Very strong language.

The reading from 1 Timothy chapter 6 goes on, in effect, in the next verse or two to say, Flee greed. Run away from it. Run for your lives from it.

[5 : 45] Don't flirt with it. Don't court it. But flee it. And in a passage in Colossians chapter 3, Put it to death. Kill it.

Get rid of it. Don't let it live in you. There's strong warnings. Cyclone type warnings. Of the dangers of greed that face each one of us.

But it's not only in those verses is greed addressed in the scriptures. As we've seen almost every week in this series, the book of Proverbs warns us in often very strong and vivid ways about greed.

Greed brings trouble to families, Proverbs 15 says. Greed stirs up dissension between people, Proverbs 28. Greed opens the door to bribery, in Proverbs 29.

And elsewhere in Proverbs, greed is listed in association with lies, evil, injustice, violence and wickedness. It doesn't have very nice bedfellows, greed.

[6 : 53] Flee it. Shun it. Shun it. And elsewhere in the Old Testament we find that partly greed for gain was one of the key sins that ultimately led to the exile of God's people from their land.

Greed is a serious sin. And so they lost their land in about 600 BC. And in Jeremiah 6 and in Ezekiel 33, two of the prophets who spoke to Israel at about that time of exile made it clear that greed was one of their presenting sins.

We should not be surprised at the seriousness with which the Bible addresses greed. Because there it is in the Ten Commandments. The only one of the deadly seven sins in a sense explicitly, though some others are implicit there I suspect as well.

The last of the commandments, you shall not covet, is in effect saying don't be greedy. And in the New Testament the same sort of thing as well. Greed is found in lists of other sins.

It is associated with different sorts of sins. In Romans 1, in Ephesians 5, in Colossians 3, in 2 Peter 2, in 1 Corinthians 6. It's the evidence of a darkened mind in Romans 1 and it flows from an evil heart in Mark chapter 7.

[8 : 09] It's there all over the place. Greed. And it's a dangerous, deadly sin indeed. Greed. And then at the end of the Bible, for those who know the book of Revelation, you may know that the Bible ends with a depiction of two different cities.

Firstly, idolatrous, evil Babylon. Standing for the world opposed to God and God's people. In a sense symbolic of Rome, of the Roman Empire of the day in which that book of Revelation was given to John in the late part of the first century AD.

And Babylon, that idolatrous enemy of God, is epitomized by ruthless greed. Greed that sees itself preying on other people.

And as part of its judgment, we're told in Revelation 18 that all that Babylon longed for in its greed, it would lose in judgment. As God destroyed it or took it away from Babylon.

Having said that, perhaps the most devastating critique or comment on greed that we find in the scriptures is from Colossians chapter 3.

[9 : 25] Let me just read one verse. Put to death, therefore, amongst other things, greed, which is idolatry.

In case you think that a bit of greed is acceptable and harmless, think again. Greed is idolatry.

The worst sin imaginable. The worship of something other than the true God. The same sort of comment is made in Ephesians chapter 5 as well.

The greedy person is an idolater. You see, greed worships false gods. Greed worships idols. Greed worships things that are not God.

And Colossians chapter 3, the verse that I just read, is actually a penetrating social comment on our age. Indeed, on every age. You see, the cathedrals of our age, the places of worship of our age, are the shopping malls.

[10 : 26] With their huge ceilings and glass-topped domes where people go and look around in awe and wonder in the vast cavernous spaces of modern worship.

And the priests of greed of our day, the consumer-driven society in which we live, the René Rivkins, pathetic figures though he is, and others are.

You see, we worship possessions, we worship money, and we go to the cathedrals of shopping centres in order to devote our attention to such idolatry. So much of our life, so much of our world, so much of our society is prepared to lose its life for gaining the whole world.

See, our world worships idols, false gods, no gods. Greedy for more all the time. Greed is idolatry.

Greed is idolatry. It's what our world worships. It's a penetrating social comment. But it's also a profoundly insightful theological comment as well.

[11 : 30] Greed worships false gods, not the true god. And social acceptability is no excuse. Just because our neighbours and our friends and our peers and our bosses and our employees and our family members all go and bow down at this consumerist altar up the hill at Westfield or wherever, or in the share market or whatever.

That social acceptability is no excuse for us Christians. Idolatry is the worst sin. Idolatry is deadly, as Revelation 18 made so clear about pagan Babylon.

It's an interesting thing as we've gone through this series of the seven deadly sins to reflect that most, if not all, of the seven deadly sins are socially acceptable in our world, if not virtues in our world.

It's astonishing, really. You might think that if something was a serious sin, that our world might sort of not really tolerate it that much. But not at all. Our world accepts, if not prizes, most of the seven deadly sins.

Envy is a virtue in our society, in fact. Pride is encouraged. Greed is entertained. Gluttony, good on you.

[12 : 51] Lust, well, that's fed all the time. Laziness is the Australian dream. Maybe alone anger may not be quite a virtue, may not be quite acceptable in some senses.

But certainly at least six of those deadly sins are actually prized and acceptable in our society. Isn't that an intriguing thing to think about? You see, what happens when we realise that is that what Paul said in Romans 1 is exactly true.

That having exchanged the truth about God for a lie, we actually end up being haters of good and lovers of evil. And that's what our world is on about.

You see, what happens is when we put ourselves on the throne instead of God, when we dismount God from the throne of our life, which is basically what sin's about, then our perception is so distorted and perverted that we actually love evil and not good.

And that's what it's like with these deadly sins. And our world is a stark example of that for us. You see, like all those other deadly sins we've looked at in recent weeks, greed comes about because I put myself on the throne.

[14 : 09] I'm God of my life. And therefore, I'm greedy. Now if this world was all there is, if when you die, that's it, finish, kaput, nothing else, then Rene Rifkin would be right.

He who dies with the most toys wins. If this world is all there is, then greed makes sense. If this world is all there is, then greed really does make a lot of sense about how we might live our lives.

Greed, in fact, would be an appropriate form of worship. But of course the problem is, this is not all there is. This is just a temporary world awaiting a permanent world that God has made.

The new heavens and the new earth that will be perfect, and on the throne at the centre of that world is God. This is not all there is. There is more.

And therefore greed not only doesn't make sense, it's actually the wrong pursuit. It's an idolatrous and an evil pursuit. Greed worships false gods, and you can't serve God and greed, or God and money, as Jesus said.

[15 : 31] Now as I've hinted at, greed is often cloaked with social acceptability. It's a deceptive cloak, mind you. We deceive ourselves.

We fool ourselves into being greedy. So we say that I want to earn more, I need to earn more, for the sake of my family, for the sake of my standard of living, for the sake of the future of my kids.

We might pursue a career change or a career promotion, which will give us much more money, much more income, more ability to possess more things, because we think, well that's what's good for my family, for my kids.

It's important for my job that I do that. And so we might pursue, for example, the accumulation of nice holiday houses. We think, well, in the pressures of my life, and for the sake of my kids, but for the sake of my own self-care, I need to have a decent holiday house, for example.

All the time, the danger is that in the accumulation of possessions, we are fooling ourselves, and we are drifting from God. Not that some of those things are bad in themselves, mind you. Don't get me wrong that holiday houses, or career promotions, or whatever, are necessarily bad things.

[16 : 45] But the danger is that in pursuit of them, or in the acceptance of them, we are actually walking down a greedy path that ends in idolatry, far from the worship of the true God.

See, one of the greatest dangers of all for Christians, it seems to me, from my observation, as well as my personal experience, is the transition from being a student to being a worker.

So many Christians that I knew when I was a student at university lost it. Not because one day they got up and said, I'm not going to believe in God anymore. I'm going to live for myself.

Not at all. But because as they began to earn money, and they began to accumulate possessions, they had a nice car, and they decided to try and save for a house, so they earn more, or they work harder, or they get overtime, or two jobs, in order to try and get established, they fall for the deceptive and insidious trap of greed, and end up not worshipping God at all.

But in the accumulation of possessions, many of which might have been accumulated for deceptively noble reasons, their cutting edge of faith and discipleship is gone.

[18 : 00] And by the time they have kids and a family, they're lost. Far from God. It's one of the hardest transitions of all.

And for those of you still students, whether secondary or tertiary, you need to brace yourself for the temptations that will come your way through greed.

For it profits you nothing to gain the whole world, but forfeit your soul. Well, as part of the corrective, we've seen several times in this series that setting our sights above, not on this world, is part of the corrective of dealing with sin in our life.

You see, when we set ourselves on the throne, our sights are set on this world. After all, heaven is very clearly the throne of God, and so we turn our eyes away from it in order to place ourselves on our throne in our world here, down under, so to speak.

So time and again, the scriptures in their various ways say, set your sights above, set your sight on the things to come, set your sights on heaven, look to Jesus who is returning. And in the context of this sin of greed, setting our sights above means setting our sights on heavenly treasure that is worth everything.

[19 : 28] Sell the lot to get that heavenly treasure, as Jesus told the parable of the pearl of great price, for example. The heavenly glory is worth everything. Get rid of anything on earth that hinders you obtaining that heavenly glory which lasts forever, which never fades, is imperishable.

And will never decay. Seek the things that last for eternity. In a sense, even be greedy for them rather than being greedy for the things of earth.

For when you die, it's gone. As Paul made clear in that reading to Timothy in chapter 6. So look for the heavenly mansion that will never need updating or upgrading or renovating.

Look to the heavenly clothes of righteousness that will never go out of fashion or indeed wear out. Look for heavenly treasure that satisfies forever.

And as part of fixing your eyes above on heaven, we fix our eyes on Jesus who is coming again from heaven to this earth the second time.

[20 : 31] How will you give account then when he comes? When you stand before his judgment throne and he says, how have you lived your life? Where has your heart been set? And you say to him, like a Rene Rifkin might sort of say, well, look at all the toys I've accumulated.

The 127 vintage cars of Lindsay Fox or whatever it is. You think Jesus will applaud you, pat you on the back, say what a great person you've been? Far from it. Don't kid yourself.

When Jesus comes again and he says, how have you been a steward of the things that you've had in your life? And you say to him, look at my huge bank account, my share portfolio, all the properties that I own, all of this that I've accumulated for the sake of my family and friends, of course, to what extent is he going to applaud you and say, well done, good and faithful servant.

How will you justify your greed before his throne on that day? It's all part of setting our sights on the things above, on heaven, on his return, on the judgment throne.

That's only part of the remedy. Jesus made clear in Mark 7 that all sorts of sins, greed included, flow from our hearts.

[21 : 46] And the story of the scriptures shows us that that's where sin takes up lodging, in our hearts. Very early on, soon after Adam and Eve, God's reflection on humanity that he'd made in the time of Noah was that every thought of their heart was evil all the time.

And we see that time and again in the scriptures that the problem of humanity is in their heart. As Jesus made clear in Mark 7, as Paul makes clear in the early part of Romans, and so on.

What we need then is something to change our heart. We've actually sung a prayer already tonight, to that end. What's going to get into our heart to change it?

Not something that we can do ourselves fundamentally, but rather tapping into what God might do in our heart. And we've seen in recent weeks, and I'm not going to elaborate on what I've said in recent weeks with this series, about some of this.

But there is power from God to change us within. The power of the cross of Christ when he died on the cross is not just an external power out there. Yes, it does bring us forgiveness of our sins, past, present and future.

[23 : 01] It means that when we're greedy, we can say to God, I'm sorry for my greed, forgive me for my greed. I turn from it, and we're forgiven. That's powerful. But the power of the cross is also power to get into the heart.

It's powerful to kill the reign of sin in us now. Jesus died for our greed now, today. We're enslaved to that greed. We can't break free from it of our own power and strength, but the power of Jesus' death applied to our hearts today means that we're set free from our slavery, to greed amongst other sins.

Now part of that power is the power of his resurrection from the dead, as we saw a few weeks ago as well. The power to impart new life, to change us from an old way of living to a new way of living.

So a powerful cross and a powerful resurrection. But there's more power than that, although it's all part of the same package, because we've also seen in recent weeks that God's word to us, the scriptures, is also powerful.

These are not just empty, impotent words of type on paper. Powerful words that we're to meditate on day and night and make sure they enter into us and take up lodging in our heart.

[24 : 13] So we're to read the scriptures, we're to think about them, we're to meditate on them, mull them over, discuss them, talk about them on the way when we're lying down, when we're standing up, make sure they get inculcated into our heart.

That's why Christian fellowship is so important, because we're not on this journey alone. It's a powerful word to save us and make us like Jesus. And there is also power in the Spirit of God, who applies the power of cross to our heart, who applies the power of the resurrection to our heart, who applies the powerful word of God into our heart as well.

And indeed God has poured His Spirit into our hearts when we become Christians. So all of those things together is a powerful corrective and antidote to sin.

Not just that on the final day we're forgiven and accepted into heaven, but that even now, there is power to dethrone sin over us and set up God on His throne over us here and now.

So God's power is where we've got to go to, rather than to try and fight this sin in our own strength and power. All of this is in the context of looking forward to that final day when Jesus returns and then and then alone will we stand perfect in His sight.

[25 : 41] Yes, there is indeed power now to dethrone sin in our life, to change us to be more and more like Jesus. But not till that final day when we're ushered into the portals of heaven will we then finally be perfect, free from the presence of greed amongst other sins on that day.

But we've also seen that the combating of sin in our life today is not simply sitting back and letting a powerful God work in and through us through the various means I've already talked about.

And it's not just by where we set our sights on heaven either. There is real human effort and desire that is required if we're combating sin.

The scriptures make that clear. We saw a few weeks ago that we are to take off the old clothes of sin and put on the new clothes. We're to strive to shed sin and strive to focus on Jesus and run the race and all those sorts of language that the New Testament uses.

All this human effort, which is real and required, begins with repentance, turning away from sin. Not simply, oh dear, I've done it again, I'm sorry.

[26 : 58] But turning away. You know, if you drive down Middleborough Road just here and you turn right at the wrong spot, you will drive onto the freeway, but the wrong way. You'll drive onto the off-ramp, not the on-ramp.

And I think there you will see a sign as you begin to go down the off-ramp that says simply, wrong way, go back. English friends of mine think that that's typically Australian blunt.

They think in England it would sort of have, you know, would you please turn around and go back or something like that. It's actually a very helpful sign and simply it's saying repent. You've made a mistake, turn around, go back.

This is a dangerous path to go down. And occasionally you hear of people who are driving down the freeway on the wrong side. I remember a story in England of a man driving down a freeway on the wrong side for about 17 miles with people flashing lights.

He thought they were all very friendly. He was about 85 and eventually the police caught up with him and took him off the road. Repent means turn around, change direction.

[28 : 02] Your intent is not to pursue the path of greed in this case, but to turn away from it and pursue the path of generosity in its place. So repentance is about desire, it's about intent, it's about your will, your intention to face the right direction and pursue the right path.

There must be a will to change. You see, repentance is not just an idol, oh sorry, I've done it again. But there is a determination to turn your direction the right way.

It begs then the question for us, do you want to be greedy? You see, one of the reasons why we don't change to be more like Jesus, one of the reasons why we continue so much in our sin is that we want to.

To be honest, sin is pleasurable to an extent. If sin was never pleasurable, we'd never do it. It's a deceptive pleasure of course because it's so fleeting.

There are greater pleasures of heaven that await us if we pursue them. Do we want to be greedy or not? And the same could be asked over all those deadly sins, indeed any sin.

[29 : 17] Are we actually serious about changing in our life or do we think it doesn't really matter? You see, I think too much of the Western Christian church is too complacent. We give lip service to repentance and confession but we pursue headlong, full bore, our greed, our envy, our pride, our anger, our lust.

It doesn't matter, God's forgiven me. He'll forgive me on the final day. Might as well do it again. Sin more that grace may abound. Paul said no. Are we serious about turning away from sin?

Is it our desire not to be greedy? Is it our desire to be generous? That's part of the remedy, part of the antidote to sin in our life here and now.

And in association with that is prayer of course. Not just because prayer is powerful, though it is, and it taps into the power of God, but prayer expresses our intention.

Do we pray, God, I do not want to be greedy? Do we pray, God, take away this greed and make me generous? Or not? Do we pray that God will work in us?

[30 : 26] Do we pray that the power of the cross will be in our hearts? Do we pray that the power of the resurrection will change us within? Do we pray that God's word will take up root in our heart? Do we pray that God's spirit will be changing us within?

Do we pray that we won't be greedy because that's our will and desire and our intent and we need God's help? Or not? But also it's worth bearing in mind that even repentance, our act of turning, actually begins with God as well.

Unless God actually works in us, we won't repent. God works in us even before we ever know it to lead us to faith and repentance. One of the great passages of the scriptures on which I spent my three years of a PhD in Deuteronomy 30 makes it clear that it is God himself by applying his word in the hearts that leads God's people to repent.

If you're not sure whether you've repented, ask God. He'll do it. He'll answer that prayer. We can be sure about that. There was a rich young ruler who approached Jesus, wanted to know the secrets of eternal life, but was sad when Jesus told him to give away all that he had for he was very rich.

In the end, he went away. It seems not to give it away. It seems to continue in his accumulation of possessions and presumably his pursuit of greed. It's very hard.

[31 : 55] Jesus said, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person, we might say a greedy person, to be saved, to enter the kingdom of God.

And don't be fooled by thinking that this camel through an eye of a needle is some sort of ancient trick where there was some gate in Jerusalem people make up as though a camel could stoop under this gate and get into Jerusalem or something.

That's nonsense. I can't get a thread of cotton through the eye of a needle very easily. I bet you can't get a camel. You can't do it. The disciples knew that because they said, who can be saved?

And Jesus says, well, what's impossible for human beings, that is, getting a camel through the eye of a needle, is actually possible for God. If anyone is going to be saved, if any rich person is going to be saved, if any greedy person is going to be saved, it is a miracle of God.

It is the power of God. And if you read on from that incident in Luke chapter 18, you see a camel going through an eye of a needle. Have you ever noticed it in the scriptures? He was a short camel.

[32 : 59] He was a tax collecting camel. He was a tax collecting camel who was up a tree. And he saw Jesus coming along. He was rich, he was wealthy, most of his money had come probably illicitly.

And this camel saw Jesus, he had to climb the tree because he was short. And Jesus called him down and said, I'm coming into your house, into your camel's house. For lunch or dinner or whatever it was. And the man overcome by being confronted with Jesus, the camel rather, being overcome by being confronted with Jesus, promised then to give away not just double what he'd collected wrongly but four times as much.

That's greed to generosity. That's a camel through the eye of a needle. That's the power of God at work. What is impossible for humans is possible for God. And that camel's name was Zacchaeus in Luke chapter 19. In a few days' time, it's Good Friday.

We know probably very well and very vividly the pain and anguish of Jesus being nailed to a cross. He's nailed to a cross because of our sin. Not just our sin in an airy, fairy, abstract sort of way.

He's nailed to our cross because you and I are greedy. He's nailed to a cross because you and I are angry. He's nailed to a cross because you and I are lustful. He's nailed to a cross because we're gluttons and so on.

[34 : 18] They're the sins that nail him to a cross leading to his death. They're deadly sins indeed. But he died to take away our sin that we may live.

Not to continue to live as greedy gluttons but to live like him, pure and spotless. This Good Friday as you think again about the death of Jesus Christ, as you think about him hanging on the cross, dying for your sins, will you nail on that cross your greed so you be no longer greedy?

Will you nail on that cross your envy so you be no longer envious? Will you nail on that cross your anger so you be no longer angry?

Will you nail on that cross your lust so you be no longer lustful? Will you nail on that cross your gluttony so you be no longer a glutton?

Will you nail on that cross your pride so you be no longer proud? Will you nail on that cross your laziness so you be no longer lazy?

[35 : 42] Will you die to sin in Christ as he died on that cross? And will you rise to new life in him as he rose from the dead on Easter Day?

Is that your sincere will and intent? Will you ask God for the power to change you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Make this Good Friday and Easter Day turning points in your life as you put away the deadly sins and clothe yourselves with the character of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.