

Greed

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[0 : 00] Well, we're talking about greed today. This is the last in the series, and you may know that Lisa and Tom pulled all these titles out of a hat, and I've been trying to cope with them since we came back from our trip to Africa.

And it's been great fun. I've really enjoyed it. And I don't know whether greed is a good place to end up, but we'll see.

Greed is an appropriate word for the month of June because it's derived from the word graduate. When you graduate, it means you then can be greedy. You can claim a part of the pie. And actually, it's going a step beyond. That's what greed means. It really started with a very ordinary word, I think, which meant hunger.

But then hunger went a step beyond hunger, and that became the word greedy. And just as in the reason it's connected to graduate is that graduate is going a step beyond, too.

[1 : 18] So that's why they're back in their roots. They're a little bit familiar. But it's come to be defined as, to be greedy is to be viciously inclined to take good things for oneself.

So you can work with that as a definition. That's what greed is. To be viciously inclined to take good things for oneself. Now the problem is that we have an abundant supply of good things, particularly in our part of the world.

We are just, I mean, you just walk into one of our big department stores or grocery stores and see what is there, what is laden.

We have such an abundant supply of good things. Cars that are marvels of engineering, food imported from all over the world, magnificent clothes to wear, brilliant theater.

We have music with symphony orchestras on mountaintops. We have a mass of accumulated things that should cause us to shout for joy.

[2 : 31] We have even created, we have so many things that we've created acute problems for atheists who really feel in trouble when there is so much to enjoy and there's nobody for them to thank.

And so that in, in, in, in, by way of, of relating to all this, we've been given appetites.

Appetites. And so we have, have an appetite for food and an appetite for drink and an appetite for personal gratification and appetite for sexual fulfillment and an appetite for power and an appetite for money and an appetite for work and an appetite for influence.

And all those appetites are given to us so that we may, in meeting those appetites, find the enjoyment of the good things by which we're surrounded.

So there are good things and we are given the capacity to enjoy them. It may even prove to be that God is good and we are given the capacity to enjoy him, but we don't get into that if we can help it because it tends to inhibit us.

[3 : 50] So, uh, I didn't mean that. You can wipe that out. Uh, the oldest human problem, however, is what happens when you're told you can't have it.

And so that if you were to picture this as the Garden of Eden and, uh, it's full of fruit trees and berries and melons and bananas and all sorts of wonderful things.

And, uh, over here is a tree with a sign on it which says, no. Then the, the, the essential problem of human existence is that the only tree in the garden that you're interested in from that point on is that one.

And that's, uh, that's the, that's the essential problem. And it's, it's what happens. Uh, what happens when you're told you can't have it?

Well, something happens. Something very fundamental to the whole of our human nature happens when you're told you can't have it. Uh, we, something goes into gear and nothing will satisfy us until

we have explored.

[5 : 00] Why it is we can't have it. And what happens if we take it, even though we've been told you can't have it. So that what happened in the Garden of Eden is that this was all laid out.

And God said, everything belongs to you. Take of it. Enjoy it. Freely. It's yours. You can do anything you like with it. It belongs to you.

It's for your satisfaction. It's to meet all the appetites that you have. Uh, there's one thing, though. Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Because, uh, he said, uh, in the day that you eat of it, you die.

Well, you see, that's, that is the human problem. The basic human problem. Which is, which is expressed in, in our greed. Well, we explode at the point where the law enters and says, uh, there is a limit.

You know, it's, uh, George Herbert wrote a poem. And he said, uh, he said, I, I can't remember the poem. But it's, it's, uh, he says, if you are coming to the third drink, throw it on the floor.

[6 : 14] Because if you don't, it'll throw you there. And, uh, you know, it's, it's this business of, of, of setting limits that is, uh, that it, that creates the whole of the human problem.

Uh, just in connection with this, uh, Joy Davidman, in her book about, uh, the Ten Commandments, quotes one of Aesop's fables where the man, I think I told you this once, but where the man was told he could have anything he wanted in the whole of the world.

Anything he wanted. It was his. The only condition was that his neighbor had to have twice as much. And that was agony for him.

And he ended up by choosing to have one eye taken out. I mean, it so perfectly illustrates the problem of the human heart.

That, uh, that, that, uh, the thing that we have to do. So that when, when you come to, uh, the point where the line is drawn and where the sign goes up saying no, then that's where human agony begins.

[7 : 27] That's where you find out what humanity is all about. So that in abortion, the fight is, where do you draw the line? And, uh, we're probably going to fight about that for, I guess, from now till doomsday.

I don't know. Uh, the, the, the, the alcohol. Where do you draw the line? And how do you draw? I mean, is it good or isn't it?

And how do you live with it? Uh, well, can you say, I have enough? How do you draw the line? When do you draw the line?

And you know how totally incompetent we are. Uh, I, I have a, a cousin who, who once was steaming along a country road at night.

And, uh, he heard a train whistle. He jammed on his brakes because he was going very fast.

[8 : 33] And his car skidded and skidded and skidded. Finally came to a stop. And the train went through behind him. Well, you see, he didn't know where the train line was.

And he'd crossed over. And, uh, we don't know where the line is. We don't know how to draw the line. If you were set up as one of the legislators having to draw the line in connection with abortion, you would, you might draw it here.

If your daughter was pregnant, you might draw it somewhere else. How do you draw lines like that? You know, when somebody gets married and the minister says to you, and you shall keep yourself only unto her or unto him so long as you both shall live.

A line is drawn. And once that line is drawn, what do you do with it? How do you live with it? Always the problem, the human problem comes out when the line is drawn.

And, uh, the, uh, the, uh, you know, the, the, the, the accumulating of power. When do you have the power that you need?

[9 : 42] The matter of sexual fulfillment. When do you have all the sexual fulfillment you need? And all the mythology we build around that. The most, uh, the most primeval instinct rages in rebellion whenever a line is drawn.

You can't go beyond this line. And anybody who stands up and says that a line has to be drawn. You stand up in the homosexual community and say, a line has to be drawn.

You stand up, uh, in, in our society anywhere and say, a line has to be drawn. Somebody said the other day, which shook me, that, that you can't, uh, if you, if you try and militate against people's personal fulfillment and draw a line, you draw wrath upon yourself.

Now this all is summed up for us in the, uh, 10th commandment. And what happens in the 10th commandment is, uh, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his servant, his maid, his ox, his ass, or anything that is his.

What happens is that your neighbor is there, you see. And, uh, he, he stands there and you stand there like that. And there's a line drawn.

[11 : 07] His wife belongs to him. His property belongs to him. His maid belongs to him. His manservant belongs to him. His ox, his ass, and all the property, all these things belong to him.

And he has to put up a line here. And because he doesn't trust you very much, he grows a hedge as high as he can up here. So that you can't get at it. And then he electrifies it so you can't climb over it.

And then he gets a guard dog so you can't, and then he goes to a security company to get bells ringing and lights flashing. To make sure you don't come across the line. Because he knows what you're like.

And of course, if you're smart, you build your own fence, get your own electric system because you know what he's like. And so, this is the kind of line we draw to separate ourselves from one another. Because we know what the other guy's like. And he knows what we're like. Now, what's happening when you do that is that what I think the New Testament is all about is saying, what should happen is that you should love your neighbor and just wipe that line out.

[12 : 20] Because you respect him. You respect what belongs to him. You respect what he owns. You know that it's his. You don't want it for yourself because it belongs to him. But you know that you can't trust yourself with his wife or her husband or something like that.

You can't trust yourself. And so, we have to build into our society all these lines to protect us from ourselves. We have to draw these lines. And when Jesus is dealing with us, he's trying to help us work out how you draw the lines.

Now, this is the story of how Jesus did it. And it's the passage that we have today as to how you draw that line.

How much can you draw the line?

So, a rich young ruler comes to Jesus in this story today and says, what must I do to have eternal life?

[13 : 29] Now, just as God has given us appetites for things, so the ultimate appetite of the whole of our human existence is eternal life.

That's the thing we want. Now, we accept substitutes. But basically, deep down, that's the thing we want. And so, he comes and he says, that's what I want.

I want eternal life. And Jesus says to him, why do you call me good? He says, there's only one good. Now, in our society, we like to think that good is just a relative term.

And you can find good here, and you can find good there, and you can find good in this pursuit, and you can find good in that pursuit, and you can find good in all sorts of things. There's good, relatively speaking, in all of them.

But Jesus wipes all that nonsense aside and says, ultimately, there is only one good, and that good is God. And if you want the good, then you can't separate it from the God.

[14 : 35] You can't spell good with two O's, ultimately. Only one. And so, Jesus establishes that with him, and then says to him, well, you know the commandments.

And the commandments tend to be God's probe into our hearts to find out what's going on there. The commandments are the kind of no signs that he puts up and says, this you can't do, or this you must do.

He says that once that's put there, then you know what's in your heart. And so, he says to the young man, he says, you know the commandments.

And the young man asking him which of them, he recites for them, you know, that thou shalt not commit adultery, and not steal, and honor your father and your mother, and don't bear false witness, and don't covet.

Those are the commandments. But what happens then is that the man says, I've kept them all from my youth.

[15 : 41] Now, I don't, you see, what happened when he said that is that he demonstrated that in his life, the law had failed. Because he thought the commandments were to tell him what he could do.

And not, and he totally misunderstood that they were to tell him what he wouldn't do. It's sort of like, I think it's sort of like the four-minute mile, you know, that you might imagine that there was a time in your life when you could run the four-minute mile.

You know how to do it, you know the discipline that's involved, you know the training that's involved, you know the skill that's involved, you know all the elements around it, and you know you could do it if you had to.

And most of us live through our lives with the commandments of God, figuring, well, if I really had to, I could do it. So let's take it that I've done it. And we make that little assumption about ourselves that if we had to, we could, and therefore we have.

And that's how we treat them. And you see, what Jesus is trying to point out to him is that he hasn't kept them, that they haven't served the purpose they should serve, and that he has failed completely.

[16:59] And so Jesus gives him a little test to see whether or not he understood the commandments in the first place. And so he says, all right, you kept them. That means that you are an A student with the highest possible expectation.

Let's try you on this. Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me. Now you see, what had happened was that that young man's heart, which is what Jesus was speaking to, and you see, in the question of greed, we can't look at anybody else.

We just don't know. One man's crust of bread may be the outward symbol of his greed, or another man's Rolls Royce may not be a symbol of his greed.

Because greed is a condition of the heart. And what you have to know is the condition of your heart. And that's what Jesus said when he said to the man, okay, I want you to know the condition of your heart.

You say that you've kept the commandments, then go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me. And having said that, you may remember that the young man went away.

[18:18] Now what it means when he went away is that the fact of eternal life was not really what he wanted. Because even though he imagined that that's what he wanted, and he speculated that that's what he wanted, when the test was made, it turned out that that wasn't what he wanted.

What he wanted was the enjoyment of what he already had. And it wasn't something else at all. And this is why, you know, in the matter of greed, you have to, in a sense, draw a line so that you know what it is that you really want.

And then you're prepared to lay aside anything else which might get in the way of getting what it is you really want. What it is you really want is eternal life.

What you really want is the goodness of God. What you really want is the fulfillment of the commandments. But that turns out when Jesus puts his finger on our hearts to be, we make the discovery that that's not what we really want.

We don't really want eternal life. There is something less than that that we're prepared to settle for.

[19:37] And it's because of that, you see, that greed becomes the dominant thing in our life. That of which we can have all that there is and more to an excess beyond all our imagination.

The unlimited supply of God is life itself. You can have all of it, the totality of it.

Life that transcends time and life that transcends space. All that belongs to you. And all that is meant when you talk about eternal life. That's what God wants you to have.

But in order to have that, there are other things that you can't have. And when you decide that it's the other things that you really want, then you miss that.

And so what this story tells us in the first instance is that what is it that we really want? And in the second instance, it tells us that we'll probably get what we really want.

[20:57] And so it's very important to know what it is you really want. And that's what Jesus did to this man by saying to him, go and sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and come and follow me.

And at that moment, the young man discovered what it was he really wanted. He really wanted, and he turned away. And you see, that's what happens in our lives in relationship to Jesus Christ.

We probably will get what we really want in life. And that should be very sobering.

We've certainly been provided with what we need, but God has promised us what, at the deepest level of our life, we really want. And we find that in following Jesus Christ.

That brings us to what we really want, which is eternal life. And greed is that force which comes to work in our lives that supplies our desires, but denies what we really want, ultimately.

[22 : 29] And, you know, because we're ending this series today, it's a matter of some concern to me that we come again to this point of what we really want.

whether what we really want is the gratification of our appetites or the fulfillment of our longing for life and life more abundant, which is in Christ alone.

And the, you know, to walk out of here today with the sobering awareness that in life you will probably get what you really want.

But that may be the tragedy of your existence that you get it and that you have turned down what you were made for and what God has planned for you, which is available to you through Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus. Father, we are grateful that the Lord Jesus, by the scriptures, in the power of the Holy Spirit, touches our hearts to reveal to us what it is we really want in life.

[24 : 08] and that he allows us to turn and walk away. And he tells us that it's very difficult not to turn and walk away.

But you have offered us the only thing that can ultimately meet the deepest longings of our hearts. Give us grace that we don't turn and walk away.

We ask in Christ's name. Amen.