

GRACED for Good

Sermon, July 7, 2019

Text: (See attached Responsive Reading)

Some of you may remember the catechetical category of the *Seven Deadly Sins*, also known as the Cardinal Sins. The listing varies slightly between sources, but generally speaking, the most commonly accepted seven on the list are (1) PRIDE, (2) ENVY, (3) AVARICE (OR GREED), (4) WRATH, (5) LUST, (6) GLUTTONY, and (7) SLOTH. This list of seven does not appear as such in the Bible; as best we can determine, the compilation seems to have originated around the fifth century, when monastic orders basically tried to address this question: "What causes sin?" What are the root causes, the root sources, what is the root of it all in human nature that leads to destructive activity in and among human beings? The premise was these seven basic sins were the deadly wellsprings from which *all* sinful actions came.

Pope Gregory the Great @ 600 A.D. was credited with formalizing the list of seven as we know it today, and this listing gained a great deal of recognition during the Middle Ages. I read that in the early fourteenth century the Archbishop of Canterbury ordered every minister in the Church of England to preach on the Seven Deadly Sins a minimum of four times a year! Now, I've been here 22½ years, and this will be the third time I've preached on the seven deadly sins ... so I'm about 87 sermons behind. I've some catching up to do! The Seven Deadly Sins show up in medieval literature, most notably Dante's *Inferno* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. As a teaching tool, some early catechisms associated each deadly sin with a familiar animal. PRIDE was usually associated with the PEACOCK. ENVY, for reasons I haven't been able to find and/or understand, was associated with the DOG (*perhaps this is the origin of the saying, "You lucky dog."*) WRATH was associated with the WOLF; SLOTH, the DONKEY (*probably because it takes a lot of coercion to get the donkey to move*; AVARICE/GREED, the Fox (*think Foxwoods Casino*); GLUTTONY, the Pig; and LUST is associated with the old GOAT.

This animal association not only served as a teaching tool, but as a reminder of the brute animal nature of sin, and that humans made in God's image should strive to rise above our animal natures. When we last talked about this I recalled what I think is my all time favorite Ann Landers letter ... I lost the original source for this, so can't cite that source, but the letter was from a man carrying on romantic trysts simultaneously with three different women. He wrote to the advice columnist: *"Until a few days ago, none of them knew the others existed and things were going fine. By chance, two of them met each other, compared notes and found me out. Now they are furious with me. What am I going to do? Signed, Trapped."* Ann Landers responded: *"Dear Trapped: One major thing separating the human race from animals is a God-given sense of morality. Since you obviously don't have that, I suggest you consult a veterinarian. Signed, Ann."*

It is good to be aware of the deadly sins, in order to avoid them. However, let's be careful not to get our focus in the wrong place ... we can get so focused on simply avoiding bad behavior and its consequences that we start to lose sight of what is right and good in the first place! We run from the bad, but we often can run in confusion if we don't know where it is good and right to go, or we have forgotten which direction to run, and sometimes we wind up just running into more difficulty. Too many people just don't know where the good and right paths *are* anymore; we certainly hear less and less in our culture today about what is good and right and wholesome and noble! Like a panicked squirrel in the middle of the road scurrying to and fro in terror trying to avoid those nasty autos bearing down on him, in his panic he loses his way ... and more often than not just runs into more trouble! Have you ever felt like that? Everything's coming at you at once, you're trying to avoid all the bad "stuff" bearing down on you and you just don't know which way to "run."

Now, hold that thought.

Some of you remember this ministerial stole I wear today is a gift from the congregation I served in New Providence, New Jersey, and it is especially suited for the Lord's Supper. The stitched image of the grapes and wheat on each side signifies the bread and wine of the sacramental elements; the quality quilting and hand-stitching of this stole was a real labor of thoughtful love by those who fashioned it. What you can't see from where you are sitting are the two Scripture selections indelibly inscribed on the inside, two verses I used again and again in my work with the young people of that congregation as we prepared for a huge mission trip to the country of Poland (*it was sort of an "inside" joke. In 1990, shortly after the opening of the Berlin Wall and the Eastern Bloc, my wife and I took a group of 41 high schoolers and ten adults to help in the reconstruction of a small Protestant*

church in Zywiec, Poland. As I used these verses so many times, they thought they'd help me save time in the future; rather than looking them up in a Bible, I could just read them off my stole.). Both verses are in our Responsive Reading. Galatians 6:9-10 -- "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*" And Ephesians 2:10 -- "*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"

Personally, I believe these two verses get right to the root of it all. According to Paul, this is what it's all about; this is why God created us and redeemed us! This is what we should spend our energies and our time and our resources proactively doing and encouraging and supporting. This is what we are created for in Christ Jesus. We are to DO GOOD ... not just think about, talk about, theologize about "the good," we are to DO good! We are to take every opportunity to do so, to do what is good and right, and especially to those who belong to the family of faith. We are to go out and find those opportunities and good works which (according to Paul) God has already prepared for us to do. I take from this that God has prepared something special for each and every one of us to do, and He has gifted each of us accordingly ... so we need to get out there, find the God-prepared opportunities, and do them, as much as health and circumstance allow! To be sure, we are not saved by good works (although, in a way we are ... when we do what is right and good, it can work wonders for us). Paul is crystal clear that it is by grace we are saved, through faith ... and this is not from ourselves, it is solely the gift of God to us. However, this is WHY God graced us: HE GRACED US FOR GOOD! This is why we are created, why He sent His Son, why we are saved, restored, redeemed, forgiven ... not just to "avoid sinning," but TO DO GOOD WORKS ... which God has prepared in advance for us to do!

That Galatians verse is preceded in the Bible with these words: "*A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*" If we go on sowing to the sinful nature, if we go on sowing "wild oats," if we keep on seeding and watering and feeding what isn't good, what'll happen? That seed will grow, and its crop will eventually wreak destructive havoc in our lives. But if we go on sowing good seeds, we will reap life. Every time we consciously choose to do what is good, to do that which we know is pleasing to God, we sow good seeds. To be clear, not all of our faithful "sowing" will take root and grow and bear good fruit. In Jesus' familiar Parable of the Sower, Mr. Sow and Sow went out to sow good seed, and about 75% of the seed didn't take root at all ... choked by thorns, failing to take root in rocky soil, getting stomped on along the path. Time won't allow a full discourse on Jesus' familiar parable (which can be found in Luke 8), but according to Jesus about 75% of our good sowing efforts just won't make it ... but the "seeds" that do take root and grow reap HUGE benefits, returning one hundred times worth or more of blessing. So, keep on sowing that good seed!

The same Paul who wrote to the church in Galatia also wrote to the church in Philippi, "*Finally, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things.*" Note that Paul did NOT write: "*Whatever is false, whatever is dishonorable, whatever is wrong, whatever is impure, whatever is ugly, whatever is disreputable, if anything is immoral or contemptible, try to avoid thinking about such things.*" No, Paul's thrust is positive. Think about what is good; focus on what is pure; give your attention to what is excellent, praiseworthy. Let's use our energies and passion and time and effort to find out, focus on and DO what is good and right; as one person put it, get so busy doing the do's that you won't have time to do the don'ts! Again, Paul's thrust is positive, proactive: Let's choose to focus our energies on what is good, let's encourage what is good, talk about what is good, promote good, and keep on doing good as much and as often as we have opportunity! Give your attention to what is lovely, excellent, praiseworthy. And just stay away from the things that make it difficult to think about and do what is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable ... which is about 80% of television programming these days, but that's another sermon.

Focus on what is good. Encourage what is good. Work hard to produce, feed, encourage, grow AND DO what is good. Encourage and affirm and cultivate what is good in others. Next to helping others come to know the grace of Jesus Christ, perhaps the most vital duty of the church is to encourage, promote, teach AND DO what is good, upright and pleasing to God. Let us encourage it, let us talk about it, let us promote it, and most importantly, let us DO it ... as much and as often as we have opportunity! Why?

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

RESPONSIVE READING

From Micah 6:8, II Peter 1:3-7, Philippians 4:8, Romans 12:9,
Galatians 6:9-10, Ephesians 2:10 and Hebrews 13:20

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?

TO ACT JUSTLY, TO LOVE MERCY AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD.

His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and true religion, enabling us to know the One who called us by His own splendor and might.

THROUGH THIS MIGHT AND SPLENDOR HE HAS GIVEN US PROMISES, GREAT BEYOND ALL PRICE, AND THROUGH THEM YOU MAY ESCAPE THE CORRUPTION WITH WHICH LUST HAS INFECTED THE WORLD, AND COME TO SHARE IN THE VERY BEING OF GOD

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

FINALLY, BROTHERS, WHATEVER IS TRUE, WHATEVER IS NOBLE, WHATEVER IS RIGHT, WHATEVER IS PURE, WHATEVER IS LOVELY, WHATEVER IS ADMIRABLE -- IF ANYTHING IS EXCELLENT OR PRAISEWORTHY -- THINK ABOUT SUCH THINGS.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

LET US NOT BECOME WEARY IN DOING GOOD, FOR AT THE PROPER TIME WE WILL REAP A HARVEST IF WE DO NOT GIVE UP.

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

FOR WE ARE GOD'S WORKMANSHIP, CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS TO DO GOOD WORKS, WHICH GOD PREPARED IN ADVANCE FOR US TO DO.

May the God of peace, who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you perfect in all goodness so that you may do His will,

AND MAY HE MAKE OF US WHAT HE WOULD HAVE US BE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, TO WHOM BE GLORY FOR EVER AND EVER! AMEN.

The Word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD.**

BLESSINGS TO ALL OUR STUDENTS AND LEADERS BEING COMMISSIONED FOR MISSION SERVICE TODAY: Logan Carson, Nicholas Cobb, Lindsay Cobb, Adam D'Antico, Luke Donovan, Henry Hersum, James Ladino, Jared Ladino, Carissa Koop, Amelia Lombard, Devon Mendez, Adi Pfeiffer, Gabrielle Pisano, Owen Phillips, Mandy-Lynn Phillips, Rachel Porcaro and Greg Warren along with adult leaders Matthew and Corrie Majeika, Stephen Clark, Cynthia Pisano and Karen Lockhart will be leaving Monday for the Llfeway/Fuge Mission Camp held at Eastern University near Philadelphia, PA, where they will spend the week in service projects, fun and fellowship with 300+ young people from all over the eastern United States. Godspeed to all!

EXCERPT FROM A JULY 2017 SERMON, UPDATED FOR TODAY:

Each summer since the year 2000, with your support, young people from this congregation and their adult leaders have gone on some sort of mission adventure, a "sowing expedition" ... if I may mix metaphors, they go out to sow their good oats (not wild oats!) and scatter their good seed. We've called these sowing expeditions "MISSION TRIPS." In 2000, twelve went to Garysburg, NC; in 2001, twenty-four went to Littleton, New Hampshire; in 2002, twenty-six went to Montgomery, West Virginia; in 2003, twenty-eight when to Ontario, Canada; in 2004, ten went to Rochester, New Hampshire; in 2005, nineteen went to Reading, Pennsylvania; in 2006, thirty-four went to Washington, DC; in 2007, twenty-six went to Philadelphia; in 2008, twenty-four returned to Philadelphia; in 2009, fifteen served in needy parts of the North Shore area of Massachusetts, mostly in Lynn; in 2010, seventeen went back to Lynn; in 2011, fourteen went again to Philadelphia; in 2012, fifteen returned to Philadelphia; in 2013, fourteen went to Nashville, Tennessee; in 2014, fourteen again returned to Philadelphia, 2015 eleven again returned to Philadelphia, 2016 ten went to Lynchburg, Virginia, 2017 twelve went to Philadelphia, 2018 saw twenty-three return to Philadelphia and tomorrow 22 are heading out, again to Philadelphia.

*Looked at in another way, this church has faithfully and generously supported three hundred and seventy young mission adventurers over the years (not counting our individual young people who served in places such as Nicaragua, Romania, Japan, United Arab Emirates, LaVida Wilderness ministry and three on summer staff with LifeWay FUGE!) They've all donated their time, energy and talents to building and refurbishing projects for needy people, they've worked with refugee or disadvantaged children, they've helped in nursing homes, they've raked, dug, weeded, painted, hauled trash, cleared debris, hammered and scrubbed; they've participated in community outreach and they've verbally shared their faith with others, and more. **What are they really up to?** Their business is not just to give themselves something "to do" in the summer, although these trips certainly do that ... however, they could easily find plenty else to do, as could their selfless leaders who take time off from work and family to accompany and assist them. Nor is their business to just do something nice for needy people, although this, too, is certainly accomplished. Nor is it their business just to have fun, although these experiences have given wholesome, cherished, enjoyable memories that'll last them a lifetime. **What is their business?** Their main business each summer is to learn how to get better at fulfilling their life's calling, which is to do good ... as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:10, for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*