

## When Virtue Becomes Vice

Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Today's passage is all about how to be devout; how to be virtuous; how to be pious. It's a passage all about traditional methods of *piety* in the Jewish faith. So, obviously, I want to start by talking not about piety, but about *impiety*; about virtues, but about *vices*.

Three pastors went to their denominational convention. They were all sharing one room at the hotel. The first pastor said to the other two, "Let's confess our secret sins to one another. I'll start. My secret sin is that I just *love* to gamble. When I go out of town, it's *cha-ching, cha-ching*, let the slot machines ring."

The other two pastors shook their heads in an affirming way as they listened to his confession.

There was a pause, and then the second pastor said, "My secret sin is that I just hate working. In fact, I don't even write my own sermons! I steal them all off the internet from other pastors."

Then the third pastor said, "My secret sin is that I LOVE to gossip and, oh man, I cannot wait to get out of this room!"

It's just more fun to talk about sin, isn't it – especially when we're not talking about our own sins?

For millennia now, the very best of us talk about virtues, while the rest of us prefer to gossip about our vices...

Apparently the Church didn't think we were doing a good enough job talking about our vices, so around 600 C.E., it formalized what it called the Seven Deadly Sins. Now we suddenly had a top-7 list to work toward! I wonder if we can name any of those Seven Deadly Sins? They are:

1. Pride
2. Sloth
3. Envy
4. Anger
5. Greed
6. Gluttony
7. Lust

There is a difference between pride that we understand as a healthy sense of confidence and the sin of *pride*. The sin of *pride* is to have an over-inflated sense of self, to be puffed up, to have your nose lifted up, as if you're better than everyone else. Because of that, some have suggested that the spirit-animal of pride is a camel – always walking

around with its nose up in the air. Others associate pride with another animal: proud as a peacock – all those beautiful, ornate tail feathers, just strutting around showing off.

*Sloth* is the sin of excessive laziness. If *pride* is the attempt to be more than human; *sloth* is the attempt to be *less* than human. Said another way, *pride* takes the dominion God has given us and turns it into destruction; *sloth* refuses to exercise dominion at all. The spirit-animal of sloth is easy. Just think of the slow moving, seemingly lazy and sleepy sloths of South America.

*Envy* is a sin of the eye. It looks on what another has and is resentful it doesn't have it for itself. We say "green with envy," because there is no worse-looking shade on a human face than when it turns green. And green is used of another image of envy: "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence."

While green is associated with *envy*, red is the color of *anger*. When you get angry you feel hot, your face turns red, and your nostrils flair out. In fact, in Hebrew, the same word is used for *nose* and for *anger*. Those of us who struggle with the sin of anger, know it not as a temporary emotion, but as a perpetual presence. It's not just something we feel in certain moments. Like the Hulk, our secret is that we're always angry.

*Greed* is when the self becomes organized around and centered on one thing: stuff. Whether its material possessions or money, *greed* wants it all for itself. A good animal for greed is the octopus, with its eight arms reaching and out and pulling things toward itself, hugging them tight in its incredibly strong grip. Or maybe for more modern ears, it could be seen as those seagulls in *Finding Nemo*, who know only one word: "Mine!"

What *greed* is with stuff, *gluttony* is with food and drink. Gluttony is a distortion of a good. Eating is one of God's greatest gifts. There is no experience I enjoy more than good food and drink shared with people I love. *Gluttony* distorts that good pleasure and – like most addictions – turns it into a compulsion used to numb ourselves from something else. And the deep paradox of *gluttony* is that in the act of over consuming, you actually become consumed by it.

And what *gluttony* is with food and drink, *lust* is with sex. Lust is particularly deadly for us because it cannot ever cure the itch that it tries to scratch. Lust tricks us into thinking that physical pleasure is the same thing as human intimacy. But they aren't the same thing. It may make you feel good for a minute, but in the long run it will only make your loneliness more pronounced. Frederick Beuchner described the fallacy of lust like this: It's "the craving for salt of a person who is dying of thirst." Simply put, it is the wrong medicine for what ails us.

So there you have it, a very brief and overly simplistic description of each of the seven deadly sins. In traditional understanding, these were called the seven *deadly* sins, not because they would necessarily kill you any sooner than if you avoided them, but because they were understood to lead to the decay and death of *the human soul*.

Now there's nothing new about those seven deadly sins. People of faith had an understanding that certain actions, attitudes, and behaviors were detrimental to our souls long before the Church ever formalized their list of deadly sins. And in response, they developed certain practices to try and counter those actions, attitudes, and behaviors. They often called these acts *acts of piety*.

In ancient Judaism, there were three traditional practices of personal piety: the practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

Almsgiving was the practice of giving money or other goods to those less fortunate than you. It comes from a Greek word that can also mean simply "mercy." To give alms was to practice mercy. And not only did this act of piety help the poor, it was also understood as an antidote for *greed*. You practiced giving away the very the thing that was hardest to let go of — your hard-earned money.

The same was true of fasting. Some of the prophets' harshest words were reserved for those who were *gluttons*. Amos looked at the wealthy people in Jerusalem and how they over indulged and he said, "You fat cows of Bashan... you don't drink your wine from goblets; you drink it from bowls!" Their excess, he said, was to be their downfall — because they grew fat while neglecting the hungry. But pious people practiced personal *fasting*, so as to not let the temptation of *gluttony* creep in on them.

The third act of piety practiced by ancient Jews was personal prayer. It was a means for connecting with God and finding inner strength. You have heard me say it before: prayer is like a plumb line. Despite some popular thinking, it does not bring God into plumb with our will (like God is a genie ready to grant wishes if we only ask the right way). Prayer brings us into plumb with God's will — which means away from excess pride and anger and envy and all the rest.

Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting: on these three practices the faithful relied to help them keep their souls healthy.

But some *misused* those practices.

John Claypool once noted that all things intended for good can be misused for evil. Take water, for example. Without its presence, life as we know it is an impossibility. All life on this planet is absolutely dependent on the nourishing and life-giving qualities of water. However, if you were to take someone's head and hold it under water, the very thing that is the source of all life can be used to take life away. All things intended for good can be misused for evil

The same is true even for acts of piety.

"When you give alms," says Jesus, "don't be like the hypocrites, who sound the trumpet when they give alms — who make a scene — so that they might be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."

Apparently, some had begun to do their acts of charity not primarily for the help it provided, for the need it met, *but* for the attention and honor it got them in doing it. Sound familiar? It should. Just picture any political candidate who shows up at a disaster-relief site or a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving day, but doesn't lift a ladle until the camera crews show up. Who is their "act of charity" really serving?

"And when you pray," says Jesus, "don't pray like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in view of others — at the synagogue and even on street corners — just for the attention it gets them. And they love to go on-and-on, as if their many words might change God's mind. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."

Have you ever been held hostage by someone's never-ending prayer? I have. I had a college minister who we started to time. His longest prayer lasted eighteen and half minutes. He prayed for so long that Jack was over their picking his fingernails and Annika, who had put her head down, had dozed off and was starting to snore, and I was sitting there thinking about what I was going to have for dinner... *if* I didn't starve first! I wanted to shake the person mid-prayer and say, "Read the room, man! It stopped being for our edification about fourteen and a half minutes ago! Now, you're just doing it to try and demonstrate how holy you are." But my sin is anger, so take that for what you will...

And then Jesus says, "And when you fast, don't be like the hypocrites who go out of their way to look sullen and gloomy and gaunt from their devotion to the fast. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."

This past week, I had lunch with the pastors from the other historic downtown churches. Somehow we got on the subject of our childhoods. A couple of the pastors were talking about how they grew up in homes where drug and alcohol abuse was prevalent. As they shared stories, one of the other pastors chimed in and said, "My house was the opposite. My dad never had a drop of alcohol his entire life. But the thing was that *he went out of his way to make sure everyone he ever met knew it*. He wore it like a badge of honor — as if it made him better than other people." Now is that any different than what Jesus says about fasting?

I hope by now you're starting to pick up on what Jesus was after. He's trying to warn us. He's trying to convey to us that if you hang around religious folks long enough you will realize that there's a very real temptation to want to *look* devout rather than actually *be* devout.

So, he asks, "What's your real agenda? Is it to make sure hungry people don't go hungry? Or is it *to be seen* helping hungry people?"

Do you see the difference? One is other focused, and the other is self-focused. Who are we really trying to serve?

Sometimes I find myself watching YouTube Shorts. They are clips that are no more than 30 seconds and they range from everything from excerpts from stand-up comics, to clips from movies or TV shows, to content created by influencers.

And I have to tell you that my least favorite clips are those that feature someone doing “random” act of kindness, that they just happened to video record themselves doing and just happened to post it on the internet for everyone in the world to see.

There’s one that I particularly dislike. Maybe you’ve seen it or one like it. It has this guy who walks around the city approaching homeless people and asking them for a couple of bucks. The homeless people often demonstrate an unnatural generosity, giving this guy with a camera whatever they have on them – a dollar, a five-dollar bill, whatever.

And when the homeless person hands the guy a five dollar bill, he says: “Wow. But I’ve got a surprise for you. Because you’ve been so generous with your five dollars, I’m going to give you \$500!” And then he captures the surprised and overwhelmed expression of the homeless man on video and posts it to his account for hundreds of thousands of followers to see, who can then praise him for his generosity.

Now what was he really after? Who did he really give that money away for? Was it to actually help the man he gave it to *or* was it for himself? To serve his own ego? To serve his own *pride*?

“Look at *me*. Look how good *I* am. Aren’t *I* such a great example? Don’t you want to be like *me*. *I* don’t judge books by their cover. *I* am out here making a real difference in people’s lives. *I* care.” But I bet he’s never given \$500 away when there wasn’t a camera recording him doing it. *Who* is he really serving?

It is when we misuse acts of piety like that that our virtue actually turns into a vice. It stops being being an act of mercy and starts being the sin of *pride*.

Did you know that often times the seven deadly sins are portrayed as a tree – each of the sins is a limb on that tree? Only pride is not portrayed as a limb. Pride is portrayed as the trunk out of which all the other sins grow.

At its worst, *pride* is an idolatry of the self. Jesus’ point is that when we practice piety like that, we are only worshipping ourselves.

So he gives us another way. He doesn’t say, don’t practice these things. Rather, he says, “*When you practice them, do it in secret...*”

When you give alms, don’t even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. And your Father you sees in secret will reward you.

When you pray, go to the inner most room of the house – the one with no windows. We might call it the closet. And shut the door, he says. Leave no chance in the world

that anyone could see you praying — no windows, door shut — so that when you pray what is meant for God's ears alone stays with God alone. And your Father who hears in secret will reward you.

And when you fast, stop trying to look gloomy. Wash and comb your hair. Wash your face. Don't wear your fast like a weight around your neck. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And the reward that Jesus promises is simple. When you practice piety for God's sake and not your own, the reward you get is the same as the reward you get in *any* relationship where you give to other without thought for yourself — you get a deeper, healthier a relationship. Only in this case it's a deeper, healthier relationship with *God*.

You know, it's easy to find a million and one examples of how people practice piety in bad ways. It's easy. They're everywhere — doing it all so that they can be seen by others. It's easy to find those folks, because for them the all the world is a stage.

It's a lot harder to point out and find the ones who really are pious, really are devout, really are faithful, really are holy. It would be a lot easier for us to emulate them if they'd just sound the trumpet or pray on the street corner, wouldn't it?

But they don't, because unlike the rest of us they don't do it for the attention. They do it for no other reason than that it brings them into deeper relationship with their Creator.

And that is the paradox of what Jesus is talking about: both those who do it for the attention of others and those who do it for God have already received their reward.

The only question left is: which one do you want to be?

Amen.