

Matthew 6:19-21; Luke 11:24-26; 8:1-3;
Acts 4:32-35; Mark 1:14-20

THE VOW OF POVERTY

Most of you know me well enough by now to know that I do not want you poor, and I don't believe God wants anybody poor either. I figured out, after only fifteen years in the ministry, that if all the Christians were poor, the stewardship and mission and proclamation and impact of the church would diminish, and that if nothing corrected the trend toward poverty, the church would cease to exist altogether.

Meanwhile, we know and honor some spiritual leaders who have shunned this world's goods, and we know that many saints took a "Vow of Poverty." It will be my claim in this sermon that everybody here has taken some kind of Vow of Poverty, and that all of us might well use this next week of Lent to examine our own vows in this matter.

Clearly we need some coordination of thought and language. We are stepping in on some mighty themes from the past, and I don't know how many of us still think they are mighty. But let's at least start out by getting reoriented to our spiritual heritage and traditions.

Jesus tells the poignant story of a man who wants to get rid of one little demon – one bad habit. We might assume that it had annoyed and troubled him for a long time. Finally he gathers up his willpower and decides to kick it out of his life. And he does. But this man does not love the good, nor does he seek to know God. He gets rid of his bad habit merely for his own comfort – only for his own good. And so, unwittingly, the man goes against one of the basic principles of life: the human soul, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

Having swept his life clean, the man assumes he has done well, and he prepares to enjoy prosperity, peace, and the benefits of his self-discipline and well-ordered life. But without purpose or allegiance beyond himself, he is soon overwhelmed – not just with his old bad habit, but with all the forces of evil. Or as Jesus says: *"It goes off and collects seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they all come in and settle there; and in the end that person's plight is worse than before."*

The number seven, in the ancient world, and certainly in the Scriptures, is used as a symbol of the perfect number. There are seven days in the week. On the seventh day God rested. On the Sabbath Day we are supposed to rest and recollect ourselves. On a seventh year all cultivated land is to lie fallow and all slaves go free. There are seven moving lights in the heavens (to the naked eye); seven archangels; seven chakras of power; seven levels of Life; seven rays of truth; seven colors of the rainbow representing seven dimensions of healing; and so on. Seven is the “four” (cross of matter) combined with the “three” (trinity of Spirit). Six represents completeness of process; therefore seven is the consummation and culmination: It is the beginning and end of a cycle – the alpha and omega number. It is the perfect number.

“Seven wicked spirits” takes on new magnitude; it’s not just evil but the *full spectrum* of evil. To depict anything at its full potential, we use “seven.” In this case, the perfect number means perfect evil. The seven demons are the Seven Deadly Sins.

Jesus’ point is that there is no neutral ground. The man cannot keep an empty house (soul) – a life uncommitted. There is a great conflict in process between the forces of LIFE and LOVE against the forces of death and destruction. We are all caught in the maelstrom of this conflict. “*Behold I set before you the way of life and the way of death.*” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). Jesus has just finished saying, “*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.*” (Luke 11:23) Is there any doubt? Do we not see the principle at work still today? There is no neutral ground. We are all caught in the spectrum between LIFE and death, between good and evil, between God and Satan – being drawn first one way and then the other. To find some safe refuge for ourselves – out of the conflict, out of the turmoil and the battle – may be everybody’s dream, but it is nobody’s reality. There is no neutral ground. We may hate the thought theologically and philosophically, but it only takes a few minutes with our memories to realize that it is nevertheless true of our experience.

Some of you even come to church hoping to get out of the fray for a while. “Church” is not out of the fray. Church is where you get your suspicions confirmed and find out what the fray is about and how big it really is. It is also where you discover you have been AWOL, and that this is your platoon.

Our ancestors in the Faith knew very clearly that they were playing a small part in a huge cosmic battle. To get it and keep it down on their level where they could deal with it, they saw themselves struggling between the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Lively Virtues of Life. That is, they watched themselves, took frequent inventory, and monitored their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and decisions to see if their lives were including the Seven Lively more and more and drawing away from the Seven Deadly. There was no question in their minds about it. Without the help of Christ (God), they could not do this; with the love and power of Jesus Christ, they *could* do it. But they also knew that it would take their own strenuous effort and all their vigilance – in cooperation with the Holy Spirit – to keep from once again getting sucked in, trapped by, or tricked by one of Satan’s Seven Deadly.

So they watched and worked each day to increase the Lively Virtues and to escape the Deadly Sins. It is not only that we wish to find LIFE and escape death for ourselves; the horror is that if we are drawn into the Seven Deadly, we ourselves become destroyers. It is not just that evil is no fun for us; we become the agents of that which wins us. There is no neutral ground. And this game is for keeps.

We probably cannot find any place, culture, or religion in the world that does not have some form of the Vow of Poverty. Yet it is not true poverty; it is not hard-core poverty. Gandhi died with very few possessions, yet much of the wealth of India was nevertheless at his disposal. He stayed with his simple life, often in palatial surroundings. Jesus died with a small estate: one robe. He also had access to more homes and meals than He could ever use, and many followers were willing to support any financial needs His ministry might require. Buddhist monks in saffron robes have wandered the world for years with nothing but the traditional begging bowl. But others would starve themselves before seeing such a monk starve. Often these same beggar monks return at night to monasteries of incredible wealth. Many monks and priests in the Christian tradition have taken Vows of Poverty and own nothing. In return, they have perhaps the greatest measure of security in terms of food, clothing, and shelter that is possible to obtain in this world.

The Vow of Poverty is not the same thing as being poor or living in poverty. Every religious way – every spiritual path on the face of the earth – has to come to terms in some way with a stance, a position,

a way to deal with affairs of material security. Tithing is one form of the Vow of Poverty. (You always suspected it, didn't you? But I don't mean it will make you poor.) Stewardship is a principle for all Christians wherein we own nothing but merely manage *for God* what we are set over. It is perhaps the most strenuous and challenging of all the Vows of Poverty.

Every one of you has formed some kind of "vow" about how you will deal with this matter. Some vow to "get all they can." Some take vows to leave it up to their husband or their wife. Some take a vow to save up to a specific level and then retire. There are endless variations, but all of us have some vow. I even know a few folk who vow not to think, worry, or plan about such things. That is probably the truest vow of poverty known to man or woman.

Now that we have come all this way, don't miss the switch. The Vow of Poverty is not about poverty – it is about greed. The issue is not poorness or being poor. The problem is that greed is one of the Seven Deadly. Greed is a killer, especially spiritually. Our spiritual forebears were not talking about finances, except incidentally. They were concerned about spiritual warfare, especially when it came to one of Satan's Big Seven. They took vows to strengthen their protection against the enemy. And those who felt the strongest draw toward greed took the strictest vows to protect themselves. Naturally!

God does not want any of us to be poor. But God does not want us to be greedy either. That is even worse. That is deadly to the soul. So tell me, what is the definition of "greed" today? *Is there* any such definition today? What would it take to make most of us feel that we had "our share"?

I have been thinking more about greed lately because I recently came down with a case of it. It was one of those magazine ads that got it started, I think. A simple thing: the suggestion of having a few million dollars. I've never tried that. It sounded like fun – at first. Soon my mind was deep into all kinds of thoughts and plans. It would have been fine and pleasant for a little while, but the thing kept coming back for days and then off and on for weeks.

Some people have money and know how to manage it, and it doesn't seem to get in their way very much. But they are used to it. It would get in my way dreadfully. I already have what I need if I maintain it, and what I want is not out of sight. I'm old enough to

know that *things* do not make me happy, and I'm almost old enough to realize that more money would not make me any better. I only want more to give it away – to play the hero. But on second thought, it is clear that such an approach could not accomplish very much toward what I really care about. So what was I doing with this case of greed?

I will not go into that any further. There were a few surprises, it started me thinking about some things that did need attention, and it appears that I have about recovered. But it reminded me of how quickly one of the Seven Deadly can jump back in, stir things up, eat up time and energy, and throw everything out of perspective. It also gave me a fresh glimpse of how much temptation to greed is floating around in our culture all the time: the lottery, giveaway shows, gambling of every sort, the majority of sales pitches; even some very solid insurance or investment programs for some are greed inducements for others.

Sometimes it is appalling to be aware of how much our society plays on our greed on purpose. We stoke the fires and use their energy to fuel our economy and draw forth our efforts *by design*. Do we really believe that nobody will get hurt playing with one of the Seven Deadly? Amazing! Greed is not a sin in our culture anymore. At least it would require such an advanced case to be noticed that, by the time it was recognized, there would be no help for it. (Maybe that is precisely our situation.)

There are some antidotes for greed. They do not work well or last without the presence and love of Christ to bring them to the proper dosage. It is nevertheless helpful to know what to cooperate with.

I.) The corresponding virtue, surprising to some people, is faith. Greed comes from a desire for more security and from the aberration that more material goods will make us more secure. Faith is trust in God's love and final purpose, and the realization that all authentic security rests in the eternal God – not in temporal things. If greed begins to grow, a dose of this particular kind of trust will heal it.

Sometimes we are looking for another solution. Or sometimes we do not want our greed healed, at least not quite yet. For the first few days of my fantasy, I was having a lot of fun with my greed and did not want it to go away. Well, it sure did not! And by the time it was no longer fun, I had nearly forgotten what was wrong and could not easily remember the antidote.

Anyway, the first place to look for the most powerful weapon against any of the Seven Deadly is to the corresponding Lively Virtue. In this case, trust in God rather than in things heals greed.

II.) In the case of greed, gratitude is also powerful medicine. It is said to be impossible to hold both greed and gratitude in the same mind or in the same heart at the same time. So far I believe it. I have tried it many times, but one always kills the other. Just be careful not to bring a little gratitude in to face a big greed. By “little” I mean half-hearted or puny. If the gratitude is genuine, even a small gratitude can play “David and Goliath” with an enormous greed.

III.) In Jesus’ story, the man only lacked a desire for something positive, something alive, something Godly to put in the place left empty by his departing demon. To want spiritual gifts more than things is also a powerful antidote to greed. Seek God’s kingdom first and let the things come as they will. (Sound familiar? I sure didn’t make that one up!)

I am only trying to point again to the reassurance we have that there are powerful allies against the Seven Deadly. Indeed, with the Holy Spirit to direct us (whenever we allow it), there is no doubt about the outcome.

What I also hope you have noticed is that each of these antidotes can quickly qualify as a form of a Vow of Poverty – a vow not to be owned or controlled by material possessions or a desire for things or money, or by the power and security they falsely promise.

But now it is time for each one of us to be left with our own vows. We do already have some vow in operation – some stance that we have taken toward money, possessions, the attraction and desire for things, the pleasures or the security they represent.

How much do you need? How much do you want? How will you go about getting it? How will you use it? Do you ever call a halt to wanting more? Where? Do you ever say, “Thank you, Lord – that is more than sufficient. Let the rest be for others.”

Our answers to such questions say much about our faith, our values, our allegiance to God in Jesus Christ. Let it be a week for considering the Vow of Poverty as you personally design it and mean to keep it.