

THERE'S GOT TO BE A BETTER WAY!

CHRIST CHURCH
LENT STUDY
2009

*Christ Church
Theme verse
for
2009*

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness

Colossians 2:6-7

When we look around the world today, we are bombarded by images of things that we know are wrong. We see violence – increasing knife crime, tragic cases of child abuse. We see addictions – to drugs, to drink, to gambling. We see huge financial problems, largely generated by greed in the financial markets. Surely the world isn't meant to be like this. Surely there must be a better way.

The Bible answers – yes, there is a better way. But before you can embark on that better way, you need to recognise what has made the way that we live so damaged. Because the things that people do are only symptomatic – as someone once said, ‘the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.’

The problem is sin. From the earliest days of Christianity, theologians tried to identify the root sins which result in so much wrong. And by the sixth century they had come up with what has been seen as the definitive list – the seven deadly sins. One writer has described them as ‘seven cancers (which) were identified and exposed as the power of sin in us, mangling our desires and pointing towards poisonous delights.’ They are: Pride, Envy, Sloth, Greed, Lust, Anger, Gluttony.

Of course, identifying the problem is only the start. But in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus gave us a better way to live – an antidote to the poison of these sins. The Beatitudes offer an alternative to each of the seven deadly sins – an alternative that leads to life in all its fullness.

So our Lent series will pick up on some of those sins, and help us think through how we can have life, rather than death.

I've taken the idea for the series from a book called ‘Seven’ by the American writer Jeff Cook (published by Zondervan, 2008).

1. PRIDE OR POOR IN SPIRIT?

WELCOME

If you could spend the rest of your life doing exactly what you wanted, what would you do?

WORSHIP

Isaiah 40 gives us one of the most wonderful pictures of the Lord in the whole of scripture. Read Isaiah 40:12-31, as an act of praise to God.

WORD

At the beginning of John Milton's classic *Paradise Lost*, Satan is cast out from heaven into the darkness; when he realises what has happened to him, he looks around, then says ‘Better to reign in Hell, than serve in heav'n'.

I think that there is something in most of us which wants to be first. We want to think we are OK. And pride feeds on this. Maybe the biggest problem with pride is that it surfaces when we are at our best. When we have managed to resist the temptation to envy someone, or lust after something, what happens? We feel good about ourselves for having resisted – we feel proud. If I fast, pride tells me what a devout person I must be. Or if I decide to fast, and then give up the moment I

feel hungry, when I recognise my failure, pride tells me that I am truly humble – which is something to be proud of!

No matter what I do, pride finds a way to twist it. I may have a poor job, no money, no friends, no iPhone, yet I still spend much of my time thinking about me. Jeff Cook writes ‘Pride is not thinking too much of myself; pride is thinking of myself far too much.’

Of course, you might be reading this and thinking – ‘I’m not that bad.’ In fact, you might be beginning to feel a bit smug about not being proud!!

Read Luke 15:11-32.

- *In what way were both the sons being proud?*
- *Can you identify with either of the sons?*
- *What damage did their pride do to them and to others?*
- *How does our pride destroy our relationships?*
- *Can anyone escape pride? What would it mean to be truly humble?*

A good way of carrying out a ‘pride check’ is to invite others to tell you where they see things wrong in your life. Pride will make you immediately resist what they say and fight back. Which is maybe why we all draw back from saying such things to one another.

Read Revelation 3:14-22

Pride can obviously be a problem not just for individuals, but for churches.

- *What was the Laodicean churches opinion of themselves?*
- *And what was God’s opinion of them?*
- *Many churches today seem to have a failure complex – they have no confidence, no hope that the gospel can transform them or their community. They have effectively given up. How can we avoid being like that and at the same time avoid falling into Laodicean pride?*

Read Matthew 5:1-12

- *How does our normal description of the blessed or fortunate person compare with what Jesus says here?*
- *What does Jesus mean by ‘poor in Spirit’?*
- *Is this how you feel about yourself?*
- *Why is being poor in spirit an indispensable condition for receiving the kingdom of heaven?*
- *Even after accepting Jesus as Lord, how might pride spoil your relationship with God?*

WORK

Where do you see pride at work in you? Pray for wisdom to recognise it, and strength to resist it.

ENVY OR MOURNING?

WELCOME

If you could swap lives with any character from the present or the past, who would it be?

WORSHIP

Read 1 Chronicles 29:10-13, then spend some time praising God for how great he is and for all he has given you.

WORD

Wanting to be someone else can just be a harmless bit of fun – so long as you don't take it seriously. The trouble is, of course, that sometimes it all becomes a bit too real. I really enjoyed my years at theological college, and now, whenever I visit a college a bit of me thinks that I'd really like to swap places with one of the students!

But that's not the only time I'd like to swap. All my life I've longed to play the piano well. And all my life I've completely failed to do so (usually because I don't practice enough!) So when I see someone who is a good pianist – the thoughts creep into my mind – why them and not me?

For you it might be a different issue. That person who always seems to be off on holiday. The neighbour who has that really

nice car. The friend whose grandchildren have all got good careers. The list is endless.

Last time we started off by thinking about pride – the way in which deep down we want to feel good about ourselves, want to feel that we are really OK. But what happens when you see someone who has something that you want? Someone whose life seems better than yours?

Read Exodus 20:1-17

The 10 commandments begin with things concerning our relationship with God: we must have no other gods, nor any idols. We must treat the Lord's name with reverence, and we are to set aside the Sabbath – a day for him.

The next commandments concern our relationships with other people – after respect for parents, we are told that we must not murder, commit adultery, steal, or lie. I guess that we can all see that these things are destructive and need to be avoided. But the Commandments end with 'you shall not covet.'

- *If you had been compiling a list of 10 commandments, would you have included this one?*

- *Given that coveting is something we do in the privacy of our own minds, why does it matter whether we keep this commandment?*

Coveting is closely related to envy – in fact it feeds on envy, because it is when we are jealous of something that another person has (envy), that we want that thing for ourselves (coveting)

Read James 4:1-3

➤ *How can coveting lead to other sins?*

➤ *In what ways can coveting affect:-
Our relationship with others?*

Our prayers?

Our own happiness?

➤ *Why can coveting never lead to satisfaction?*

about those who are meek, and those who ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness.’ So I think that Jesus means ‘mourning’ in a spiritual sense – mourning for our poverty of spirit.

➤ *Why is this necessary if we want to be comforted?*

➤ *How does the result of this mourning differ from the results of envy?*

*‘I am to love God enough to be
contented; ... I am to love men
enough not to envy.’*

Francis Schaeffer

Read Psalm 23

➤ *What do you think the writer means by saying that because the Lord is his shepherd he will not be in want?*

➤ *How should a relationship with the Lord affect our envy?*

WORK

Is there anyone you are envious of? Pray for them, thanking God for what he has given them, and for what he has given you.

Read Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus says ‘blessed are those who mourn,’ it seems unlikely to me that he was talking about those who have been bereaved or faced some similar situation. In the previous verse he talked about those who are ‘poor in spirit’, he goes on to talk

SLOTH OR HUNGERING FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

WELCOME

Would you rather work in the garden, read a book, go for a walk, or watch TV?

WORSHIP

Psalm 34 is a prayer of thanks for what God did in rescuing David. Although the circumstances might be different, the Lord has rescued us from an even greater peril. Use the psalm to thank him.

WORD

Having thought so far about the damage that pride and envy can do to ourselves and to our relationships, maybe what we need to do is not to do anything! After all, if you don't do anything at all, you can't do anything wrong! So perhaps sloth is a good idea.

But sloth isn't just about doing nothing. Jeff Cook puts it like this: 'Sloth is not mere laziness. Sloth is indifference – indifference towards my soul, my neighbours, my world, or my God. Drug users, TV addicts, and obsessive video gamers may

be poisoned by sloth, but so are most workaholics. Sloth is not restfulness. Sloth is escapism of the deadly sort.'

The American sociologist Neil Postman wrote a book a few years ago called 'Amusing ourselves to death'.

- *How good a description of our society do you think this is?*

Read Isaiah 22:8b-13

- *What was it that God's people were doing wrong?*
- *Do you see this tendency in your own life? In our church?*

Read Matthew 5:1-12

- *What do you think it means to 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'?*
- *How does this contrast with the activities of sloth?*
- *Jesus says that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. Does this mean that we will reach a stage when we no longer need to be hungry?*

Read Matthew 6:25-34

- *What are the sort of things that the people around us are running after at the moment (v.32?)*
- *How do you understand ‘the kingdom of God’? As something purely spiritual, or as something concerning the whole of life?*
- *What do you think it means to ‘seek first the kingdom of God’ (v.33)? Does this help you to understand what Jesus meant in Matthew 5:6?*

WORK

The Bible tells us that we need rest (Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God – Exodus 20:9). But it also tells us that we should be active in serving others (Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me – Matthew 25:40)

This week, where will you find time to rest? What will you do to serve others? How will you avoid sloth?

Read Colossians 3:1-17

Paul tells us to ‘set our minds on things above, not on earthly things’

- *Do you think he means that we should have no interest in life here and now?*

In verse 17 we are told ‘whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’

- *How can this help us to avoid becoming slothful?*

4. GREED OR MERCY

WELCOME

If you were given a large amount of money, what would be the first thing you would buy yourself?

WORSHIP

‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.’ (Genesis 1:31)

Psalm 111 lists some of the things God has done for us. Use the psalm to praise him.

WORD

One of our families Christmas rituals is watching ‘The Muppet Christmas Carol’ – with Michael Caine playing Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge is one of the great characters of literature, and he is also one of the classic depictions of greed. Scrooge is constantly wanting to make more money – but not because he wants to indulge himself. He sits alone at night with a single candle to light his cold bedroom. ‘Darkness is cheap, and Scrooge liked it.’

Scrooge just wanted to accumulate more. And that is how many people are in our society today. In fact, far from being seen as a deadly sin, greed often seems to be praised in our society – or

at least it was till the financial bubble burst a few months ago, and finally everyone could see the damage which greed does to society.

Yet despite that, the world’s wealthiest nations still hoard their wealth; the world’s wealthiest people still want to become wealthier, and many people are constantly dissatisfied with what they have, and want more, and more.

- *Do you think that people are basically selfish?*
- *In what areas do you find selfishness a temptation?*
- *What is the difference between living life to the full and being selfish?*

Read Genesis 3:1-13

- *Why did Eve take the fruit?*
- *What was wrong with wanting those things?*
- *Are there ways in which the desire to have something good for ourselves can be a source of temptation to go against what God has said?*

Eve wanted to gain wisdom, but without the context of obedience to God.

Read Colossians 3:5-14

- *Paul says we need to put to death ‘greed, which is idolatry’ (v.5) Why is greed a form of idolatry?*

How do Paul’s instructions in verses 12-14 act as an antidote to greed?

- *How does this function as the opposite of what society does when it stores up treasures on earth?*
- *Why should we be concerned about treasures in heaven rather than treasures on earth?*
- *In what ways does the society we live in condition us to seek material wealth?*

Read Matthew 5:1-12

- *Jesus says ‘Blessed are the merciful.’ What does it mean to be merciful?*
- *Why can being merciful be seen as the opposite of greed?*
- *Why do we need to receive mercy? What is the difference between receiving mercy, and hoarding our own wealth?*

Read Matthew 6:19-24

In Matthew 6:19-20 Jesus draws a distinction between storing up treasures on earth and treasure in heaven.

- *What sort of things do you think he meant by ‘treasures in heaven’?*

Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10

- *What does Paul call ‘the root of all evil’?*
- *Does this mean that Christians should not have money?*

Mammon isn’t only a problem for those who do have wealth. It can be just as much of a problem for those who don’t have much at all.

- *How can we help each other to be contented in a society which suffers from rampant discontent?*

WORK

One of the best antidotes to greed is to give things away. Is there something you could give to someone else this week that will be a blessing to them, whilst at the same time helping you to be less greedy?

5. LUST OR PURE IN HEART?

WELCOME

Tell everyone about something that made you laugh or smile in the past week.

WORSHIP

In a world where the word ‘love’ is often used so casually, read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. It has been pointed out that you could replace the word ‘love’ with the word ‘Jesus’, and that would give a picture of his perfect love for us. Spend some time thanking him for his love.

WORD

As we’ve looked at these deadly sins over the past few weeks, something that has occurred to me is that all of them take something good and distort it. So, for example, in a world where many people do suffer from low self image, having a healthy self image is good. But push that too far, and you end up with pride. Enjoying the good things which God gives us is good – push that too far and you end up with greed.

And, of course, love is good. But twist it a bit, and you end up with lust. Lust, like greed, is something which our society has

removed from its list of sins, and at times seems almost to make a virtue of. Lust is a lever in some advertising – why else would so many cars be advertised with attractive women draped over them? And lust fuels an adult entertainment industry which in 2004 was estimated to be worth between £20bn and £50bn.

The writer of one book I read recently said that 90% of men are affected by lust, the other 10% are liars! And I suspect that it isn’t purely a male issue.

So – where is the problem? Why does the classic list of seven deadly sins include lust?

Read Ephesians 5:1-16

‘But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality ...’ (v.3)

- *Presumably there were plenty of other things that these Christians needed to avoid. So why do you think Paul singles out this as the vital issue?*
- *What sort of things does society class as ‘sexual immorality’ today?*
- *Are there other things that the Bible would include under that heading which our society is happy to accept?*

I guess that still for most people, adultery would be seen as being wrong. But as was so often the case, Jesus was concerned not just with what people did, but what went on in their hearts.

Read Matthew 5:27-30

- *Why is lust like committing adultery in your heart?*

Do you think Jesus meant us to take what he says in verses 29-30 literally? If not, what did he mean?

Job 31:1 says ‘I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.’

- *Are there things which we should avoid looking at?*
- *How should we decide what we should or should not read or watch on television, video etc.*

Read Matthew 5:1-12 (again!)

What does it mean to be pure in heart?

Why would being pure in heart lead to ‘seeing God’?

Read Philippians 4:4-9

Paul gives us a list of things we should think about (v.8) Are these things seen as important in our society?

What can we do to encourage ourselves to think about these things?

Why would thinking about these things lead to knowing the peace of God?

WORK

What causes you to feel lust? How can you avoid that this week?

