

GLITTERING VICES GLORIOUS VIRTUES

A Text Talk Study Guide
Accompanying the Sermon Series
2011



Adult Education Council
Western Hills United Methodist Church
Spring 2011

Glittering Vices, Gloried Virtues

(Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Virtues)

A Text Talk Study Guide Following
The Sermon Series for Spring 2011

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Note

This Text Talk Study Guide is distributed by the Adult Education Council for groups or individuals to use in following the sermon series for Fall 2010. We hope this guide will equip you to consider and study the biblical texts that will be the bases for the sermon each Sunday.

The Bible is too rich in meaning for there to be only one meaning for a passage. While it is interesting to discuss what a group or other individuals think a passage says, that is not the most important part of any study. Each person has to decide for himself or herself what a text means. Keep the focus on the text and bring yourself to it, willing to hear the word God has for you within that passage, today. Enjoy the experience.

As a guide for class discussion, there is intentionally more material than any one can use in the time allotted for the class. A one-hour Sunday School class is only 45 minutes long after prayers and concerns. There should be plenty of material to choose from.

Bible quotations are from New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (1989), unless otherwise noted.

Biblical texts are copied from www.biblestudytools.com

Ideas That Underlie This 17-Week Series

Definitions from American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language online at <http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/>

sin *n* **2.** *Theology*

- a. Deliberate disobedience to the known will of God.
- b. A condition of estrangement from God resulting from such disobedience.

virtue *n* **1.** a. Moral excellence and righteousness; goodness. b. An example or kind of moral excellence: the virtue of patience.

Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Cardinal Virtues, as paired for this sermon series

Vice	Virtue
Pride	Wisdom
Envy	Faith
Anger, Wrath	Love
Sloth	Courage
Avarice, Greed	Justice
Gluttony	Temperance
Lust	Chastity

The list and the number of sins have varied over the centuries. The traditional listing of seven deadly sins was compiled by Pope Gregory I (the Great) in AD 590. Over subsequent centuries, substitutions were made: lust for *luxuria* (or extravagance) and sloth for *acedia* (apathy, discouragement).

They have also been termed “cardinal” sins and virtues, meaning most fundamental. The Catholic Church has distinguished between mortal (serious) and venial (less serious) sins.

1. The idea behind lists of cardinal sins and virtues such as the one in this study is to try to identify those human behaviors that are the sources of all other sins. Do these lists do that?

Watch for the **Language Study** questions in the sessions. Consider the terms in the boxes and decide on the broad meanings of each Sin and Virtue. For example, is Pride more than being egotistical? Is Sloth more than being a couch potato?

2. Why, do you suppose, that the traditional list of “seven deadly sins” does not align more closely with lists of bad behaviors in the Bible, notably: The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20); the seven in Proverbs 6:16-19; and Paul’s list of 15+ in Galatians 5:15-21? Is one list any more inclusive than the others? Are any more fundamental?
3. Why are more specific sins not on such a list? Why not idolatry, murder, adultery and infidelity, stealing, vindictiveness, gossiping, cruelty, bigotry, exploitation?

What about war, tyranny, religious persecution, genocide, slavery, human trafficking, addiction, power-grabbing, environmental pollution, waste, causing a financial crisis, allowing hunger and poverty?

5. What about other virtues? An old proverb says that patience is a virtue, but doesn't call it a cardinal virtue. Would your list include generosity, kindness, mercy, compassion, perseverance, honesty, responsibility, humility, and piety? What about righteousness, as in Matthew 6:33 ("Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness ...")?
6. There are many Bible passages that talk about sins, and the Church has made several lists of the worst ones. However, many people — including Jesus — have pointed out that the real problem is Sin, not individual sins; that is, a human condition not just behaviors that are only symptoms. (The Bible talks about both Sin and sins.) What do you think?
7. If a person could control all seven sins, would he or she be righteous in God's eyes? Would that person be a Saint? Would Sin be controlled?
8. What do you think about this observation from a website with a Catholic point of view (whitestonejournal.com/seven_deadly_sins/):

"If one or more of these doesn't seem like a big sin to you, it almost certainly means you have already rationalized it. Work on that one first."

9. A common (secular) saying is "Oh well. Nobody's perfect." Another is "To err is human, to forgive divine."* They are often used to excuse minor errors and mistakes. What's the difference in saying "nobody's perfect" and "all have sinned"?

** No it's not in the Bible; it's by Alexander Pope (1688-1744).*

1. Sunday, January 9 — Our Common Hope

Colossians 1:15-29

15 [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to **reconcile to himself** all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

21 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him — 23 provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. **I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.**

24 I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. 25 I became its servant according to **God's commission that was given to me** for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the **mystery** that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

Old Testament Commentary

God at creation, in Genesis 1:31 — God saw **everything** that he had made, and indeed, it was **very good**.

New Testament Commentary

Paul on his own difficulty in following Jesus, in Romans 7:15-25 — I do not understand my own actions. **For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.** Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. **Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Note: Hope is also the subject of Sunday 6 in this series.

Discussion Starter: What was the spiritual climate in your home growing up?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. In the Colossians passage, how does Paul describe Jesus (verses 15-23)?
2. Summarize the gospel that Paul has been talking about in verses 15-23.
3. What does Paul mean by calling himself a “servant of the gospel”?

Digging Deeper

1. In the Colossians passage: What is the “mystery” referred to in verses 26-27?
2. In the Genesis passage: What are the implications of believing in a God who made everything and declared it was all good?
3. Considering the Romans passages together: Paul was probably the greatest Christian evangelist in history. Why did he anguish over his behavior? How can someone spend his life traveling to call people to Christ and yet feel so “wretched”? Why didn’t that torment undermine his effectiveness?
4. In the Romans passage: Does Paul’s struggle in doing “the very thing I hate” sound familiar? What in your inner life do you struggle with? What’s the solution?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** “Hope” is one of many words in the English vocabulary that have developed mushy meanings. We talk of “hope chest,” “hope for the best,” and “hope against hope.” We hope for a better job or to pass a test, meaning “I want it to happen.” Often we do not convey expectation or anticipation. A famous saying is “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” But Psalms and other books in the Bible talk about “hope (or trust) in the Lord.” What does that mean?

2. Paul said that “sin dwelt within him.” How do you explain the source of human sin?

3. What do you hope for?

A Parting Thought from John 3:16-17 — “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

A Parting Prayer of Confession and Pardon—

Merciful God,
we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have failed to be an obedient church.
We have done your will,
we have broken your law,
we have rebelled against your love,
we have not loved your neighbors,
and we have not heard the cry of the needy.
Forgive us, we pray.
Free us for joyful obedience,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

From A Service of Word and Table II, The United Methodist Hymnal (1989)

Sermon Notes

2. Sunday, January 16 — Our Common Problem

Genesis 3:1-7 — The First Sin

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.' " 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and **you will be like God, knowing good and evil.**" 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the **eyes of both were opened**, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Note that this story never uses the word "sin."

Old Testament Commentary

From the story of the Tower of Babel, in Genesis 11:4 — "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and **let us make a name for ourselves**; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

From the Ten Commandments, given to Moses by God, in Exodus 20:3b-5a — "... **you shall have no other gods before me**. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them"

Isaiah 53:6 — All we like sheep have gone astray; **we have all turned to our own way**, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

New Testament Commentary

Jesus, in Mark 7:18-23 — "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For **it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come**: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Paul, in Romans 3:22b-24a — ... For there is no distinction, since **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**; they are now justified by **his grace as a gift**, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Discussion Starter: What was your earliest understanding about man's sinfulness (that people weren't always nice)? Or, what is your biggest, most dangerous temptation?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What did Eve say God prohibited about the trees in the garden? (Compare what God told Adam in 3:23.)
2. What temptation did the serpent offer Eve?

Digging Deeper

1. Why did Adam and Eve fall for the temptation? Is their motivation similar to that in the Tower of Babel story?
2. Explain whether Adam and Eve are equally responsible? For what?
3. Was the reason for "punishment" in the Babel story the same as the one in the Adam and Eve story?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. How do you interpret Genesis 3 and 11: Was the original sin Pride or Greed? Or something else? What do you think was human's original (basic) problem?
2. The Isaiah, Matthew, and the Romans passages say that everyone is sinful. How do you explain sin? Are humans born pure and innocent and become corrupted by other people? If so, why? Or, are we depraved from the womb and must struggle to overcome their sinful natures? If so, why? (How about the old line, "The devil made me do it.")
3. Is there a good answer to Maxie Dunnam's question?

When we stop taking evil seriously, when it becomes a mere coincidence of genes, or psychology, or simply someone else's fault, our ability to take good seriously begins to dwindle as well. If we aren't responsible for the bad, how is it that we're entitled to take credit for the good? (p. 1)

A Parting Thought from Paul, in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 — I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

A Parting Prayer of Confession from The Book of Common Prayer —

Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against thy holy laws.
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;
and we have done those things which we ought not to have done;
and there is no health in us.
But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.
Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults.
Restore thou them that are penitent;
according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord.
And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly,
righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy name.
Amen.

The original Book was first published in England in 1549, largely written by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. A version of this prayer is in The United Methodist Hymnal (1989), #891.

Sermon Notes

3. Sunday, January 23 — Pride

2 Chronicles 33:1-5, 10-13 — The Reign of Manasseh,

1 Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign; he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. 2 He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. 3 For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had pulled down, and erected altars to the Baals, made sacred poles, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them. 4 He built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem shall my name be forever." 5 He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. 6 He made his son pass through fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom, practiced soothsaying and augury and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. 7 The carved image of the idol that he had made he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever; 8 I will never again remove the feet of Israel from the land that I appointed for your ancestors, if only they will be careful to do all that I have commanded them, all the law, the statutes, and the ordinances given through Moses." 9 Manasseh misled Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that they did more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the people of Israel.

Manasseh Restored After Repentance

10 The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they gave no heed. 11 Therefore the Lord brought against them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh captive in manacles, bound him with fetters, and brought him to Babylon. 12 While he was in distress he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. 13 He prayed to him, and God received his entreaty, heard his plea, and restored him again to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord indeed was God.

Old Testament Commentary

Proverbs 16:18-19 (Good News Translation) — Pride leads to destruction, and arrogance to downfall. It is better to be humble and stay poor than to be one of the arrogant and get a share of their loot.

God, in Isaiah 65:1-5 — "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name.

I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices;

a people who provoke me to my face continually...

who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you*.' These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long. ..."

* KJV's phrase "*holier than thou*" has entered the English vocabulary to refer to a hypocritical someone who is sanctimonious, arrogant, and smug.

Old Testament Commentary (continued)

From the Teacher in Ecclesiastes 1:2-3: Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! **All is vanity.** What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

In other translations, "vanity" is translated as "meaningless," "useless," and "pointless."

New Testament Commentary

From the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Luke 18:9-14: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector and "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" and "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Variations of the latter quote are found elsewhere in the Gospels; for example, in Matthew 20:16; Mark 10:31; and Luke 15:30: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first."

From Paul, 2 Corinthians 12:5b-10: "...on my own behalf I will **not boast, except of my weaknesses.** But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, **a thorn was given me in the flesh,** a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "**My grace is sufficient for you,** for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Discussion Starter: Have you ever been caught red-handed in doing something really embarrassing? How did it turn out? Did you feel loved anyway?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What did Manasseh do that was "evil in the sight of the Lord"?
2. How was he "restored"?

Digging Deeper

1. Is Manasseh's story one about getting on God's good side — begging for forgiveness and all will be well? How should the story be understood?
2. In the Luke passage: What does it mean that the exalted will be humbled and vice versa?

3. In the Corinthians passage: "Thorn in the side" has become a part of the English vocabulary to mean a nagging annoyance. Paul doesn't identify what his "thorn" is. What does he mean by boasting about the "thorn in his side" and Jesus' grace being sufficient?

A variation of this image is in Numbers 33:55, where the Lord tells Moses that the Israelites were to cross into Canaan and drive out all inhabitants or they will be "barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides."

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** Do you agree with Chaucer's Parson (The Canterbury Tales, ?1387) that Pride is the root of all evil? Notice the large number of related terms and actions in the box below. Most of the terms are related to other sins, such as Anger or Envy. Some may not be "sinful" in themselves unless overdone. Do you think they are all good examples of Pride?

How would you define "pride" as a deadly sin in its broadest sense? Is there a better word than "pride" for this sin?

arrogance / vanity / willful / egotism / self-serving / elitism / pecking order, food chain / corner office / self-made man / ambition / narcissism / roomful of egos / ego trip / celebrity, Super Star, sex goddess / famous for being famous / pundit, know-it-all / in-group, clique / peer pressure / status symbol / trophy wife / bragging rights / boasting / bullying / bad-mouthing / judgmental / in-groups, cliques / holier-than-thou attitude* / religiosity / puritanical / sanctimonious / hypocrisy / snob appeal / pride of place / on a high horse / patronizing / big duck in a little pond / Winners and Losers / un-level playing field / adversarial legal system / black sheep / prejudice / defamation / racism, sexism, ageism, nationalism, etc. / WASP / extremism, fanatic / polarizing / Reign of Terror, pogrom, purge, genocide, killing fields, ethnic cleansing, Holocaust, massacre / witch hunt / stigma / scapegoat / censorship, book burning / walling in and walling out / gated communities / marginalize / wrong side of the tracks, ghetto, slum caste system / shibboleth, undesirables, barbarian, outcast, heretic, ostracize, pariah / persona non grata / Them and Us / "playing God" / Captain Ahab, Captain Nemo, Citizen Kane / lunatic fringe / True Believer / cult of personality, Jim Jones, David Koresh / tyrant, dictator / Pharaoh, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Peron, Hussein, etc. / Cold War / conquest / empire building, imperialism / xenophobia, homophobia, etc. / My way or the highway / cronyism, Good Ole' Boys / patronage / playing favorites / teacher's pet / "keeping up with the Joneses" / control freak / "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." / "We're Number One." / "Outwit Outplay Outlast" (Survivor), American Idol / defending one's honor, duel / saving face

* *God's assessment of his people's attitude toward Him, in Isaiah 65:5*

2. What insight do the following quotations give us in discussing pride?
- The mind is its own place, and in it self / **Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.** — Satan, in John Milton's epic poem, Paradise Lost (1667)*
 - Young man — / Young man — / **Your arm's too short to box with God.** — James Weldon Johnson, "The Prodigal Son," God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse (1927)*

4. Sunday, January 30 — Wisdom

Romans 12:1-8 — A Living Sacrifice

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Old Testament Commentary

Job 28:28 — “And [God] said to humankind, ‘Truly, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.’ “

“Fear” in the archaic sense of dread and reverence.

Isaiah 29:13-14 — The Lord said:

Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

New Testament Commentary

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1:22-29 — For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Discussion Starter: Have you ever been affected by peer pressure? Even as an adult? Positively or negatively? How did shape you?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What does Paul say is “holy and acceptable to God”? Does “sacrifice” mean martyrdom?
2. What should followers do when they have different abilities? Not everyone can be a tireless evangelist like Paul?

Digging Deeper

1. In the Romans passage: What is a “living sacrifice”?
2. The Job passage is one of many in the Bible that talks about “the fear of the Lord.” “Fear” in what sense? Why is “fearing” God a wise thing to do?
3. Concerning the Isaiah passage: What’s wrong with “honoring God with lips”? (Compare the modern phrase, “lip service.”)
4. In the Corinthians passage: What, to Paul, is the difference in human wisdom and God’s wisdom? In what sense did he call God’s wisdom “a stumbling block” and “foolishness”?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. In the Romans passage: What does Paul’s idea of being “members of one another” mean? Is it the same as the modern idea of “teamwork”?
2. Regarding the Corinthians passage: Do modern Americans look for “signs” or “wisdom” about how to live their lives? Where do most people seem to look for guidance?

5. Sunday, February 6 — Envy

Galatians 5:16-21 — The Works of the Flesh

16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and **do not gratify the desires of the flesh.** **17** For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. **18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. **19** Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, **20** idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, **21** envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things **will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

Note: To the modern ear, the phrase “works of the flesh” may sound like a reference to overeating or what has been called “recreational sex.” But Paul is referring to a wide range of worldly concerns that focuses our attention away from God. Envy is only one in his list of “deadly” things.

Old Testament Commentary

The last of the Ten Commandments, given to Moses by God, in Exodus 20:17 — “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

From Matthew 27:17-18 — So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

New Testament Commentary

James 3:13-18 — Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom — it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats. **Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others.** It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do **the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.**

Some other stories of envy from the Bible: Cain and the first fratricide (Genesis 4), Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25), Joseph’s brothers (Genesis 37), Saul’s jealousy of David (I Samuel 18)

Discussion Starter: Give examples of how people spend excessive time and energy “keeping up with the Joneses” or “getting ahead”?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What does Paul say are “works of the flesh”? Did he leave anything out?
2. Why are they “opposed to the Spirit”?

Digging Deeper

1. Does Paul’s list make it easy to think, “I don’t do any of those things. God must be OK with me”? Or, are some of my behaviors hiding under those names? Are there other considerations for the Kingdom?
2. What did the Teacher say was “vanity and chasing after wind”?
3. What does James say about building a healthy community (such as a church)?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** Envy does not seem to have as many relatives and near-relatives as, say, Pride. Of course, these behaviors often mix with Pride or another of the Seven Deadlies. (Some may not be “sinful” in themselves unless overdone.) Do any of the terms in the box not fit your idea of Envy? Are there other examples?

jealousy, coveting / wicked queen in Snow White (“who’s the fairest ...?”) / the “green-eyed monster” (Othello) / invidious / rumor mill, gossiping, “Inquiring minds want to know.” / belittling / ill will, malice, spite, grudge match / conniving / undermining / “The grass is always greener ...” / keeping up with the Joneses / status symbol / sibling rivalry / slander, libel / tabloid news

How would you describe “Envy” in its broadest sense?

2. Why can’t people be happy with what they have? All we need is will power?

6. Sunday, February 13 — Faith

2 Chronicles 20:14-22 — Jehosaphat's Victory

14 Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the middle of the assembly. 15 He said, "Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the Lord to you: 'Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for **the battle is not yours but God's.** 16 Tomorrow go down against them; they will come up by the ascent of Ziz; you will find them at the end of the valley, before the wilderness of Jeruel. 17 This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.' Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, and the Lord will be with you."

18 Then Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshiping the Lord. 19 And the Levites, of the Kohathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

20 They rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa; and as they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God and you will be established; believe his prophets." 21 When he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy splendor, as they went before the army, saying,

"Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever."

22 As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the Ammonites, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed.

Old Testament Commentary

Proverbs 3:5-6 — Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and **do not rely on your own insight.** In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

New Testament Commentary

Jesus, in Matthew 17:20 — [Jesus] said to them, "For truly I tell you, **if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.**"

Jesus, in Luke 12:28 — But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you — you of little faith!

Discussion Starter: Give examples from modern real life that illustrates someone's great faith in God. Or an example of lack of faith.

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What did Jahaziel tell Jehosaphat to do about the threatening army? Why?
2. Whose and what military tactic won the battle for army of Judah?

Digging Deeper

1. What was meant by “the spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel”? Does God speak to military men today in that way?
2. Summarize Jehosaphat’s rallying speech (verses 20-21).
3. Matthew passage: Should we take this advice literally? Move mountains? Be able to do anything?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. According to Paul in I Corinthians 13, love is more important than faith and hope:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ...

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

What does it mean to say that love is more important than faith? Do you agree?

2. Compare the reason given for Jehosaphat’s victory (the battle is God’s) to the view of Abraham Lincoln (Second Inaugural Address; March 4, 1865; during the American Civil War). What do you think is God’s role in human warfare?

Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

7. Sunday, February 20 — Anger

Ephesians 4:25-28 — Rules for the New Life

25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us **speaking the truth** to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. 26 **Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,** 27 and do not make room for the devil. 28 Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

Old Testament Commentary

God to Moses, in the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 10:13 — You shall not murder.

KJV, ASV, and RSV use “kill,” presumably ruling out warfare and capital punishment. Yet there are numerous examples of both in the Old Testament that are shown as God-approved.

Genesis 4:4b-7 — And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? **If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.**”

New Testament Commentary

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:21-22 — “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you **that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment;** and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” **And in 7:5** — “You hypocrite, **first take the log out of your own eye,** and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.”

Paul, in Romans 12:19 — Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

The quotation is also used in Hebrews 10:30. Both refer to Deuteronomy 32:35.

Discussion Starter: Describe a time in your experience when anger got out of hand. What was the result?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. How should we treat our neighbors?

2. How should we handle anger, even appropriate anger?
3. What should thieves do? (Is this wishful thinking?)

Digging Deeper

1. The passage from Ephesians suggests that anger can sometimes be justified? How so? When?
2. In the Genesis passage: How do you interpret God's advice to Cain? Is sin something outside humans, like the traditional imagery of the devil, waiting to pervert them? Or is the potential for sin within each person?
3. In contrast to the Ephesians passage, Matthew shows Jesus as making no allowance for anger for any reason. So, is there a place for anger or not?
4. In the Romans passage: Does Paul believe that God will wreak vengeance on people? He certainly does in many Old Testament stories especially, such as Noah and Sodom and Gomorrah. The New Testament has a number of passages suggesting what has come to be known as "hellfire and brimstone." But God is most often depicted as a God of love. What do you think is the role of judgment and vengeance in God's kingdom?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. An old saying advocates the best way to prevent dissension: "Never discuss religion and politics." What do you think?
2. Jesus cleansed the Temple in "righteous indignation" in all four Gospels (Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48; and John 2:13-22). What are examples of times we should exhibit anger?

3. **Language Study** Anger has many relatives and near-relatives. Some of them overlap with Anger, Envy, and Greed. Do you think that all these traits and actions in the list below are examples of the sin of Anger? (Some may not be “sinful” in themselves unless overdone.) Can you think of others?

rage / wrath / flying off the handle / hitting the roof / losing it / malice, spite / profanity / road rage / impatience / holding a grudge / smoldering resentment / vindictive / revenge / retaliation / pay-back time / Them and Us / holy war, Crusades, jihad / random violence in the Middle East, Mexico / blame game / scapegoat / witch hunt / McCarthyism, blacklisting, Red Scare / heathen, pagan, infidel / vendetta, feud / rampage / rioting / hate crime, hate mail / terrorism / random violence / venomous speech / confrontational / heated arguments / confrontational / in your face / retaliation, revenge / punishment / antagonism / hostility / dissension / rancor / armed camps / strife / polarizing an issue / political rivals, Republican vs. Democrat, Liberal vs. Conservative, etc. / playing politics / smear tactics / negative ad campaign / voter anger

How would you define “anger” in the broadest, deadly-sin sense?

4. Note the Parting Thought (below) in which God is seen as “slow to anger” (but not without it). Here the emphasis is on compassion and mercy. How can God be both angry at times but loving and compassionate always?

A Parting Thought from Psalms 103:8-14 — The Lord is merciful and gracious, **slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love**. / He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. / He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. / For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; / as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. / As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. / For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

A Parting Prayer from Sy Miller and Jill Jackson (1955) — Let there be peace on earth, and **let it begin with me**; / let there be peace on earth, **the peace that was meant to be**. With God our creator, children all are we; / Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

* From *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (2008), #431

Sermon Notes

8. Sunday, February 27 — Love

1 John 4:7-12 — God Is Love

7 Beloved, **let us love one another**, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Old Testament Commentary

God, in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (The Jewish *Shema*) — “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

God, in Leviticus 19:18 — “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

These two commandments are identified by Jesus as parts of the Great Commandment, in three Gospels: Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:29-30, and Luke 10:27

New Testament Commentary

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:44-48 — “But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Paul, in 1 Corinthians: 1-3, 13: If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do **not have love, I am nothing**. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do **not have love, I gain nothing**. ... faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Discussion Starter: Describe people you find hard to love. Are some people “unlovable”?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. Why should we “love one another”? John is writing to other Christians. Does he mean Christians should love other Christians, band together?
2. Why love one another? Or, as some might put it, “What’s the payoff”?
3. What’s John’s point about “no one has ever seen God”?

Digging Deeper

1. Regarding the Matthew passage: Is this a major characteristic of churches today (loving our friends)? What is the best response to Jesus’ question in Matthew 5? Is it even possible to love people we don’t know or like? What does this kind of love mean?
2. In the 2 Corinthians passage: Do you agree with Paul that love is the greatest of human attributes? Greater than faith and hope?
3. Some listings of deadly vices and corresponding virtues do not include Love. The deadly sin of Anger was paired with Patience. (Compare the old saying, “Patience is a virtue.”)

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** The way that the word “love” has been treated in the English language has been called an example of language pollution. We “love” food, cars, clothes, and chocolate. Some of us have “love handles.” A “loving cup” is the prize in some sporting events. We “love” other people (as in “I’m a people person”). We “make love”; we “fall” in love “at first sight.” We distinguish between “puppy love,” “true love,” and “tough love.” We have talked of “brotherly love.” (Does anyone use that term anymore?) We promise (at least in traditional wedding vows) “to love and honor” a marriage partner.

English has only one word (“love”) to translate three in New Testament Greek: *agape* (divine love), *eros* (sexual love), and *philia* (attraction). Note that English has derivatives from the last two — such as erotic, philanthropic and bibliophile (book lover) — but no word based on *agape*. Which means that Bible translators and readers need to be careful.

What happened to the concept of “love” in the English language? Is it even a meaningful word these days? What does it mean?

9. Sunday, March 6 — Sloth

Proverbs 24:30-34 — Further Sayings of the Wise

30 I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person; 31 and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. 32 Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. 33 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, 34 and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.

*Note: Over time, in the list of Seven Deadly Sins, the sin of sloth took the place of **acedia**, which has been thought of variously as discouragement, despondency, indifference, apathy, boredom, and feelings of futility. However, it may be that none are adequate synonyms for the ancient word. See the comment by Kathleen Norris under What Do the Texts Mean to Us? in this lesson.*

Old Testament Commentary

Proverbs 6:6-9 — Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise. Without having any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep?

This idea was in one of Aesop's fables (ca. 650-520 BC). There was also a 1934 Disney cartoon version in which the grasshopper sings, "Oh, the world owes me a living."

New Testament Commentary

From the Parable of the Talents, in Matthew 25:24-30 —But his master [of the slave entrusted with one talent] replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then **you ought to have invested** my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For **to all those who have, more will be given**, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

From Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 —Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: **Anyone unwilling to work should not eat**. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Discussion Starter: Describe a kind of laziness that especially irks you.

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What did the lazy man (not) do?
2. What was the result?

Digging Deeper

1. In some listings of vices and virtues, the deadly sin of Sloth was paired with the virtue of Diligence. What do you think is the truer counter to it? Diligence or Courage?
2. In the Old Testament passages: What is the value of hard work? What's the point?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** Sloth has many relatives and near-relatives. Some of the words and phrases in the box below, of course, share characteristics with other Deadly Sins. Perhaps you wouldn't categorize them as examples of the sin of Sloth. (Some may not be "sinful" in themselves unless overdone.) Think of Kathleen Norris' contention that, if a negative behavior involves a moral choice, it's a sin. If not, it may be a medical or other problem needing the help of others.

Are all the terms in the box below examples of the sin of Sloth involving a moral choice?

lazy bones / fritter away / indolence / "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." / slacker / goldbricking / shirking responsibility / "Let George do it" / benign neglect / care-free / prodigal son / couch potato / TV babysitter / TV as "vast wasteland" / in a rut / hanging out / easy way out / loitering / task avoidance / comfort zone / commitment phobia / vagrant, tramp, hobo, bum / tunnel vision / looking the other way / having blinders on / cheating, plagiarism / pampering, coddling / "Easy come, easy go." / indifference / boredom / complacency, apathy, indifference / bunker mentality / "Excuses, excuses" / "See if I care" / "Somebody [else] should do something" / "We've never done it that way before" / "I don't care what anybody says ..." / escapism / head in the sand / comic strip characters, Wally (in Dilbert) and Beetle Bailey / "Good enough for government work" / shoddy workmanship, cutting corners / "Woe is me" / pity party / "Ain't it awful" / shrinking violet, wallflower / Aesop's fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper / the children's story, "The Little Red Hen" ("Not I")

How would you define "sloth" in its broadest, deadly-sin sense?

2. In America's past, there were ideals of hard work: the Puritan work ethic, Benjamin Franklin, Horatio Alger stories of "rags to riches," "rugged individualism," and others. John Smith wrote about his "no work, no eat" policy* for the Jamestown colonists in the early 1600's. A saying from the pioneer days was "Make do. Do without. Do it anyway." Does America today value hard work and "making something out of yourself"?

* Paul gave a similar instruction in his second letter to the Thessalonians (3:10-12).

3. What do you think of this historical analysis by Kathleen Norris ([Acedia & Me](#), 2008):

[Over time, the church dropped acedia from its list of seven deadly sins], and the monks' profound understanding of the common temptations that all people suffer lost ground to a concept of sin as an individual's commission of a bad act or omission of a good one. This is turned to a superficial form of self-justification, for instance: If I don't overeat, then I'm not guilty of gluttony; if I don't commit adultery, I am free of lust. The emphasis on acts also contributed to the Church's power; it alone could identify the acts that it alone had the power to absolve. The monk's subtle comprehension of temptation as thoughts that the individual may identify and resist before they turn into harmful actions was largely submerged. The insidious thought of acedia was not easily defined as an act, and it was soon subsumed within the sin of sloth. (p. 30)

4. Would you call the following kind of behavior "sloth", a concentrating on self? (From Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel's popular song "I Am a Rock," 1986). It included this stanza:

I've built walls / A fortress deep and mighty / That none may penetrate / I have no need for friendship / friendship causes pain / It's laughter and it's loving I disdain. / I am a rock / I am an island.

Compare "I am an island" to John Donne's famous line:

"No man is an island entire of itself ... therefore never send to know for whom the [death] bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

What is the proper relation of human beings to each other?

Parting Thoughts from Ann Lee*: "Put your hands to work, and your heart to God." and "Do your work as though you had a thousand years to live and as if you were to die tomorrow."

*1736-1784, founder of the Shaker sect

A Parting Prayer Based on James 1:22: Help us in not fooling ourselves into thinking that we are listeners when we are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Help us to act.

10. Sunday, March 13 — Courage

Joshua 1:1-9 — God's Commission to Joshua

1 After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, 2 "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. 3 Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. 4 From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. 5 No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. 6 Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. 8 This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. 9 I hereby command you: **Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.**"

Old Testament Commentary:

King Hezekiah, 2 Chronicles 32:7-8 — "Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him; for there is one greater with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God, **to help us and to fight our battles.**"

New Testament Commentary:

Jesus, in Matthew 9:2 (Good News Translation) — ... he said to the paralyzed man, "Courage, my son! Your sins are forgiven."

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:13 — No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, **and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength**, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it

Discussion Starter: Describe some of the "invented heroes" or cultural idols in American culture past or present. What is there about some people do you think do not deserve adulation they receive?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What did God tell Joshua to do?
2. How was success to be guaranteed?

Digging Deeper

1. In the Chronicles passage: Does God fight battles for his chosen armies today? Is it the New Testament view that God fights our battles for us? How can 21st-century people best understand such passages and apply them?
2. In the Joshua passage: What “law of Moses” was God talking about? The Ten Commandments? Something more?
3. In the Matthew passage: Jesus’ words to the paralyzed man make it sound as though “impossible” things can be done? How? “Just do it,” as trademarked Nike commercials urged would-be athletes? Is it just a matter of will power, of firm belief?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** What’s the difference in the following terms and the Biblical idea of Courage?

Courage / bravery / valor / dauntless / intrepid / courage of one’s convictions / cocksure, bravado, foolhardy, brash

Antonyms: Timid / shy / feeling inferior / spineless / yellow / chicken / “courage in a bottle”

2. What lessons can be learned from these views of courage?
 - a. *All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.* — Edmund Burke, Irish statesman (?1729-1797), attributed
 - b. *The only thing we have to fear is fear itself, nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.* — Franklin Delano Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 1933, during America’s Great Depression

c. *It starts with you. In the end, God simply calls you to be faithful to the things He has given you to do. He doesn't require you to be a superstar, just faithful and obedient, by praying, loving, serving, giving, forgiving, healing, and caring — doing small things with great love. You, Me, let's go. We have work to do, and it's urgent. Join me* — Richard Stearns, The Hole in Our Gospel (2009)

2. Are heroes born, not made or made, not born? Do some people have what it takes, can rise to the occasion, and others can't? Or does everyone have the potential but choose not to work at it? Of course, God often chose people to do his work (Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Saul/Paul, Jesus). What's the difference in a hero and everyone else?

3. What fears do people have that prevent them from becoming "fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ"? Do we not trust that God will provide us with strength in risky situations? What about you?

A Parting Thought from Jesus, in Matthew 9:2 — "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"

A Parting Prayer, from Harry Emerson Fosdick: "Save us from weak resignation to the **evils we deplore**; let the search for thy salvation be our glory evermore. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, serving thee whom we adore, serving thee whom we adore."

From "God of Grace and God of Glory" (hymn, 1930); The United Methodist Hymnal (1989), #577

Sermon Notes

11. Sunday, March 18 — Avarice (Greed)

Luke 12:15-21 — The Parable of the Rich Fool

15 And [Jesus] said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's **life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.**" 16 Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21 So it is with **those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.**"

Note: "Eat, drink, and be merry" has become part of the common English vocabulary. It originally appears in Isaiah. Instead of heeding God's call to mourning but the people's response was, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." God responded, "Surely this iniquity will not be forgiven you until you die, says the Lord God of hosts." Presumably the unforgiveness was due to the people's unrepentance.

Old Testament Commentary

The last of the Ten Commandments, given to Moses by God, in Exodus 20:17: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or **anything that belongs to your neighbor.**"

The Teacher, in Ecclesiastes 4:4, 8b — Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is **vanity and a chasing after wind.** ... their eyes are never satisfied with riches.

New Testament Commentary

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:24 — "**No one can serve two masters;** for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Paul, in Philippians 4:11b-13: **I have learned to be content with whatever I have.** I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Discussion Starter: What's in your garage, closets, attic, shed, and/or storage unit that you haven't used or even seen in years? Why are you keeping it?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What did the rich man do? Why? What did God tell him?
2. What happened to him? What's the moral (so to speak) of this parable?

Digging Deeper

1. About the Exodus passage: Who is the "neighbor" we shouldn't covet?
2. About the Luke passage: What about the farmer's actions did Jesus regard as sinful?
3. Regarding the Matthew passage: Is it true that no rich men can "love God"?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** Avarice has many relatives and near-relatives. Notice the large number of related terms in the box below. Do you think all of them are examples of the sin of greed?

Greed / selfishness / egotism / the Midas touch (a curse) (Greek myth) / "He who has the gold gets to rule" / naked self-interest / playing politics / sold his soul, Faust (German legend) / gold digger / "Diamonds are a girl's best friend." / sugar daddy / spendthrift / miser, Scrooge / hoarding / the prosperity gospel / "I deserve it; I earned it" / get-rich-quick schemes / "If it's too good to be true ..." / "There's a sucker born every minute" / usury / consumerism, materialism / affluence, affluenza / living beyond one's means, maxing out credit cards / "If some is good, more is better" / The Latest and Greatest / "fully loaded" / throwaway society / conspicuous consumption, the leisure class / the *nouveau riche* / The Ultra Rich, "filthy rich," idle rich, money to burn / ostentatious display of wealth / jet set / creature comforts / the latest thing / The Almighty Dollar / living high on the hog / "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer" / killing the goose that laid the golden egg (Aesop) / cash cow / milking something for all its worth / charging whatever the traffic will bear / scalping / litigious society / black market / "Everything has its price," "Everyone has a price" / anything to make a buck / looking for loopholes / exploitation / paternalism, patrón / company town, company store / predatory / cutthroat competition / power grab / land grab / hostile takeover / insider trading / conflict of interest / scam / graft, payola / on the take / bullying / monopoly / market domination / "Too big to fail" / kickbacks / Sin City / having your cake and eating it too / Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? / "You can have it all"

How would you define "greed" in its broadest sense? Is it limited to money-related issues?

2. Compare these ideas about money. What can they teach us?
 - a. *To Trump, money is but "a scorecard that tells me I've won and by how much," he says. If that is the definition, "then yeah, I do it for the money."* — quoted in Thomas Kostigen, "Reaching New Heights: What Money Means to Donald Trump," CBS.MarketWatch.com (February 1, 2002); excerpted from his book, What Money Really Means (2002)
 - b. *"Someone reminded me I once said 'Greed is good.'* Now it seems it's legal. Because everyone is drinking the same Kool Aid." and "It's not about the money. It's about the game."* — "Gordon Gekko," a ruthless corporate raider in Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps (movie, directed by Oliver Stone, 2010); * in Stone's original movie, Wall Street (1987)
 - c. *"Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can."* — a simplified version of John Wesley's philosophy about money

3. What are the implications of this idea from William Willimon: *"We live in a society in which just about every vice has been repackaged, humored, and presented as a virtue."* (p. 29)

4. Do you agree with Chaucer's Pardoner (The Canterbury Tales, ?1387) that greed is the root of all evil? Or do you agree with Paul: *Love of money is a root of all kinds of evil* (1 Timothy 6:10)? (It is often misquoted as "Money is the root of all evil." A more modern saying is "It's all about money.") What do you think the fundamental problem is?

5. Regarding the Philippians passage: Why can't people just be satisfied with what they have?

A Parting Thought from Jeremiah 6:13-15 — For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not ashamed, they **did not know how to blush**. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord.

A Parting Prayer from Mary Daniel*: Thank you, Father, for words in prayer when we need them. May our supplications be brought to you from a place of gratitude, not greed. May we pray for the prayer, not the power. And may our desires for "more" and "less" be prayed as a request for "enough". In Your name we pray. Amen.

**Presbyterian Church in Canada; at daily.presbycan.ca/devotions/2001/01-08-25.html*

12. Sunday, March 25 — Justice

Micah 2:1-5 — Social Evils Denounced

1 Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. 2 They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. 3 Therefore thus says the Lord: Now, I am devising against this family an evil from which you cannot remove your necks; and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time. 4 On that day they shall take up a taunt song against you, and wail with bitter lamentation, and say, "We are utterly ruined; the Lord alters the inheritance of my people; how he removes it from me! Among our captors he parcels out our fields." 5 Therefore you will have no one to cast the line by lot in the assembly of the Lord.

Micah 6:8 — God Challenges Israel

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

NRSV's use of "mortal" instead of "man" is part of its inclusive language. (Here, for example, Micah's point is not limited to males.) But the word also points out human mortality.

Old Testament Commentary

Jeremiah 31:27a, 29-33 — The days are surely coming says the LORD when ... they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." But **all shall die for their own sins**; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and **I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.**

This concept updates the passage in the Ten Commandments forbidding worship of other gods "for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6).

Many Christians take this "new covenant" as a foreshadowing of the Gospel message based on grace instead of Hebrew Law.

Amos 5:21-24 — I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But **let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**

New Testament Commentary

Jesus, in Matthew 23:23-24: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin*, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced **without neglecting the others.**”

** The tithing even of herbs to conform to Jewish law*

Discussion Starter: Give some examples of times when “justice was served,” but you disagree.

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What social evils did Micah identify in this passage? Will the “bad guys” be punished and the “good people” be relieved?
2. What “evil time” did he foresee? For whom?

Digging Deeper

1. The passage from Amos sounds anti-synagogue, and by extension, anti-church. How else can it be understood? Do you think God is against organized religion? What does God expect?
2. What’s Jesus angry about in the Matthew passage? What is the implication for congregations?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** The word “justice” is now often used to refer to law enforcement (as in demanding that justice be done and bringing someone to justice.) The Department of Justice, Juvenile Justice Center (detention facility), Justice of the Peace.) What do we mean by saying that “justice was done”? How was the word used in the Bible (for example in the Micah and Amos passages)?
2. **Language Study** What’s the difference in justice and mercy? Are mercy, compassion, and fairness synonyms or do they mean different meanings? Can large groups and governments aspire to do more than mete out justice according to the letter of human law?

3. Someone has made these distinctions: Justice without mercy and mercy without justice. The first would be the law-and-order, by-the-book, letter-of-the-law approach to governance. Some might think of the second as wishful thinking — making decisions on the basis of mercy. But Jesus we should forgive seventy times seven times (probably not a number to be taken literally). Many think that justice is the business of government and mercy is for individuals or small groups. Can a large, diverse society dispense both justice and mercy?

4. Should this congregation be doing something differently to promote biblical justice?

A Parting Thought from Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10: 23-24 — “All things are lawful,” but **not all things are beneficial**. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.

A Parting Prayer from Psalm 72: 1-2 — Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.

A Parting Prayer from Alan Paton* — O Lord, open my eyes that I may see the needs of others; open my ears that I may hear their cries; open my heart so that they need not be without succor; let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong. Show me where love and hope and faith are needed, and us me to bring them to those places. And so open my eyes and my ears that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee.

**South Africa, 20th century, in The United Methodist Hymnal (1989), #456*

Sermon Notes

13. Sunday, April 3 — Gluttony

Philippians 3:17-21 — Breaking with the Past

17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; **their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.** 20 But **our citizenship is in heaven,** and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to **make all things subject to himself.**

Old Testament Commentary

The Teacher, in Ecclesiastes 5-19 — Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil — this is the **gift of God.**

However, a common refrain throughout Ecclesiastes is that everything is meaningless, in vain. The idea of enjoyment as God's gift to men is modified in the last chapter: "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone" (12:13).

Isaiah 22:14 — In that day the Lord God of hosts called to weeping and mourning, to baldness and putting on sackcloth; but instead there was joy and festivity, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating meat and drinking wine. **"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."** The Lord of hosts has revealed himself in my ears: Surely this iniquity **will not be forgiven** you until you die, says the Lord God of hosts.

Luke 12:15-19 uses "eat, drink and be merry" in the parable of the rich fool with a similar dire warning.

New Testament Commentary

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:6 — "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:8 — But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

Discussion Starter: What is an important goal in your life? What is getting in the way?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. How do many "live as enemies of the cross"?

2. What does Paul mean about being “citizens in heaven”?

Digging Deeper

1. What do you think of the Teacher’s idea that enjoyment in work is a “gift of God”?
2. Do The Teacher and Isaiah have contradictory views about enjoyment? Or, are they talking about different things?
3. What do Jesus and Paul think is more important than literal food?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** Gluttony has many related terms. Which of the words and phrases in the box below do not belong? That is, you wouldn’t categorize them as examples of the sin of Gluttony. (Some may not be “sinful” in themselves unless overdone.)

obesity / sugar, fat, and sodium / sugar high / upgrade, “Supersize it?”* / plate waste / Other food obsessions: bulimia and anorexia / “All you can eat” / chain smoker / intoxication / drunk driving / binge drinking / chain smoker / addiction / overdosing / uppers and downers / indulgence / being in denial / “I can’t help myself.” / impulse buying / instant gratification > instant coffee, instant pudding, instant camera, instant messaging, instant credit-card approval / living beyond one’s means / hoarding / exploitation / slavery / workaholic** / having your cake and eating it too / “What’s your pleasure?” / fun and games / bread and circuses (ancient Rome) / gilding the lily / lack of will power / Anything Goes (Broadway musical, 1934)*** / decadent

** A marketing slogan referring to 7-ounce French Fries and a 42-ounce drink at MacDonald’s Restaurants in the early 2000’s, phased out in 2004 ** Glutton for punishment? *** Saying “anything goes” in the 21st-century means a whole lot more than in the 1930’s!*

How would you define “gluttony” as a deadly sin in its broadest sense? (Is this word even used in 21st-century America?) Is there a better word for 21st-century America?

2. Do you agree with these observations from William Willimon?
 - a. *What we want is pleasure that does not unduly harm us: “Safe sex.” “Sensible drinking.” Low-fat devil’s food cookies.”*

[How about also “designated driver” and “no-fault divorce”? What else do people think will allow them to have their cake and eat it too?]

14. Sunday, April 10 — Temperance

Romans 6:8-14 — Dying and Rising with Christ

8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 The death he died, **he died to sin**, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. 13 No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. 14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but **under grace**.

Old Testament Commentary

Proverbs 25:28 — Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control.

New Testament Commentary

Matthew 16:23 — [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, “**Get behind me, Satan!** You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Paul, in Romans 14:19-21 — Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but **it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat**; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.

James 1:26 — If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is **worthless**.

Discussion Starter: What kind of self-control is most difficult for you to achieve? What would help?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. According to Paul, why did Christ die?
2. What does “dying to sin” mean?

3. What will prevent Christ's followers from sin's "having dominion over" them?

Digging Deeper

1. In the Matthew passage: Why did Jesus call Peter "Satan"?
2. In the second Romans passage: What did Paul think can "destroy the work of God"?
3. Regarding the James passage: Is an "unbridled" tongue the root of all evil that makes that person's religion "worthless"? Why worthless?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. In modern dictionaries, the first definition of "temperance" has to do with the avoidance of extremes, but the second one is about avoiding alcohol altogether; in other words, sobriety or teetotalism. According to the website of the modern Women's Christian Temperance Union, the organization's motto takes a third approach, taken from the Greek philosopher Xenophon (c. 400 BC):

*Temperance may be defined as: moderation in all things **healthful**; total abstinence from all things harmful.*

Notice the word "healthful." Is Xenophon's rule of thumb a good one (easy to follow)?

2. Do you agree with this observation of Alexander Wolcott (1887–1943, American critic and commentator for The New Yorker magazine): **Everything I like is either illegal, immoral or fattening.** How about H. L. Mencken's oft-quoted sarcasm about Puritanism: **"The fear that someone, somewhere, is having fun"**?

Is there anything that is fun and enjoyable that is not bad for us? Should Christians avoid pleasure as taking our minds off God? What about Jesus described as going to parties and sharing meals? He even allowed an expensive perfume to be poured on him in honor.

3. Should Christians also be moderate in their religious beliefs also? Should they avoid blind faith and fanaticism? How can they (we) decide the right balance?

15. Sunday, April 17 (Palm Sunday) — Lust

2 Samuel 11:1-5 — David Commits Adultery with Bathsheba

1 In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. 2 It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. 3 David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." 4 So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. 5 The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

Note: Over time, in the list of Seven Deadly Sins, lust took the place of luxury or extravagance.

Old Testament Commentary

God, to Moses, in the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20:14 — "You shall not commit adultery."

New Testament Commentary

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:27-8 — "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Jesus, in the story of the woman caught in adultery, in John 8:7, 11 — "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" and "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

A similar idea is in an old proverb about people in glass houses

1 John 2:15-16 — **Do not love the world or the things in the world.** The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world — the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches — comes not from the Father but from the world.

Discussion Starter: Describe the first girl or boy you were attracted to. How did that relationship turn out?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. Why did David "lie with" Bathsheba? "Love at first sight"? Is this a story of "true love"?

2. What was David's sin? (What sin did the prophet Nathan "pin on" David? See Chapter 12.)

Digging Deeper

1. Do these two ideas mean the same thing? "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" and "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."
2. In the Matthew passage: Why would Jesus say that merely looking at a woman is the same as adultery? Are women to be exempt from this warning?
3. Regarding the Matthew passage: What do you think about candidate-for-President Jimmy Carter's well-circulated admission about adultery, in an interview in Playboy (November 1976):

Because I'm just human and I'm tempted and Christ set some almost impossible standards for us. The Bible says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Christ said, I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust has in his heart already committed adultery. I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times.... This is something that God recognizes, that I will do and have done, and God forgives me for it. But that doesn't mean that I condemn someone who not only looks on a woman with lust but who leaves his wife and shacks up with somebody out of wedlock. Christ says, don't consider yourself better than someone else because one guy screws a whole bunch of women while the other guy is loyal to his wife. The guy who's loyal to his wife ought not to be condescending or proud because of the relative degree of sinfulness.

(The historian Douglas Brinkley observed, "Do not underestimate what a crisis that interview and the "lust in my heart" caused Carter. It almost derailed the entire Carter campaign.")

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. **Language Study** Lust seems to be a sin with a narrower range of bad behavior than Pride or Greed — sex-related. Can you think of others for the list below?

carnal knowledge / living in sin / sexual revolution / free love, promiscuity / orgy / lechery / recreational sex / suggestive clothing / safe sex / Little Red Riding Hood ("What big eyes you have"), sexual predator / Casanova, Don Juan, Lothario, Lolita / pornography / sexting / prostituting oneself / adult entertainment / pornography / adultery / incest / Marquis de Sade / sadism and masochism / perversion / sex trafficking, sex slaves /

How would you define "lust" as a deadly sin in its broadest sense?

2. UMC Bishop William Willimon has said, “It is not too great an overstatement to say that my job as a preacher is to make discipleship as interesting as orgasm.” Do you agree that American seems overloaded with sex images and sex talk that is much more attractive than Christianity properly understood? Why is that?

3. In November 2002, Osama bin Laden circulated on the internet a “Letter to the American People,” calling them “to stop your oppression, lies, immorality and debauchery that has spread among you.” Most Americans, of course, reject his main ideas, for example: “The first thing that we are calling you to adopt is Islam.” However, some of his specific ideas have also been expressed by many Americans. What do you think of the following statements?

(iv) *You are a nation that permits acts of immorality, and you consider them to be pillars of personal freedom. ...*

(vi) *You are a nation that exploits women like consumer products or advertising tools calling upon customers to purchase them. ...*

(Quoted from the www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver)

A Parting Thought from Paul, in Ephesians 4:22-25: You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

A Parting Prayer from Psalm 39:12-13 — Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears.

Sermon Notes

16. Sunday, April 24 (Easter) — Hope

Luke 24:13-33 — The Walk to Emmaus

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17 And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” 19 He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. 22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23 and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. 24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him. 25 Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!’ 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29 But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. 30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 32 They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” 33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

Old Testament Commentary

Moses, in Deuteronomy 30:11-14: ... turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Surely, **this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you**, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?”

The commandment referred to is the renewed covenant of the one God made with the His chosen people beginning with Abraham. One short statement of the pledge is “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Exodus 29:5).

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New Testament Commentary

From Jesus, in Matthew 26:27-28 —Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant*, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

**Some authorities add “new” — the new covenant, as understood by Christians.*

From Paul, in Romans 4:18 (Good News Translation) — Abraham believed and hoped, even when there was no reason for hoping, and so became “the father of many nations.”

RSV translates “Hoping against hope ...”

Discussion Starter: Describe a very difficult time that you (or someone you know) have (has) gone through (loss of spouse, loss of job, etc.). What helped?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What were the men talking about?
2. When did the man finally recognize Jesus?
3. Why had their hearts been “burning” on the road?

Digging Deeper

1. In the Deuteronomy passage: What was that Moses told the people?
2. What is the Old Testament idea of God’s covenant?
3. In the Matthew passage: What was the new covenant?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. Do you agree with this statement from Maxie Dunnam:

“Optimism is not essential for kingdom reality. In fact, it is an enemy. But [secular] optimism is not [Christian] hope. Hope is altogether something else, and hope is the essence of the Reign of God. Hope is the confidence that God is alive and sovereign. We trust that, in ways we may not understand, God is at work, and one day will establish God’s kingdom.”

What’s wrong with optimism?

2. In what do Christians place their hope? Having a personal Jesus, going to heaven, personal salvation, avoiding hellfire, no more strife and hunger and pain, being reunited with loved ones, an eternal life to come, the kingdom of God, “to dwell in the house of the Lord forever? What?
3. How do you interpret these lines from the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 7: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”? What is “the kingdom of God”?

A Parting Thought in Psalm 40:17 — As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.

A Parting Thought from the 23rd Psalm — The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Sermon Notes

17. Sunday, May 1 — And What Now?

Galatians 5:16-21 — The Works of the Flesh

16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19 Now **the works of the flesh** are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not **inherit the kingdom of God**.

The Fruit of the Spirit

22 By contrast, **the fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Old Testament Commentary

Moses, in Exodus 34:9 — “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is **a stiff-necked people**, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”

The description “stiff-necked” in the NRSV Bible four times in Exodus (three times by the Lord), in 2 Chronicles 30:8, and by Stephen in Acts 7:51, contributing to his being stoned as the first Christian martyr.

New Testament Commentary:

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7:15-20 — “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **Thus you will know them by their fruits.**”

“Wolf in sheep’s clothing” has become a part of the English vocabulary. An Aesop’s fable (5th century BC) made a similar point but had a happy ending.

Discussion Starter: When you were a child or a teenager, what did you want to be “when you grew up”? Now, what do you want to be remembered for?

What Does the Text Actually Say?

1. What does “live by the Spirit” mean?
2. Verse 22 talks about the “fruit of the Spirit” (not “fruits”). Why then does Paul list a number of virtues?

Digging Deeper

1. In verse 26, does Paul mean that avoiding conceit, competition, and envy will cure the list of sins in verses 19-21?
2. In the Exodus passage: The description “stiff-necked” is used twice (three times by the Lord), in 2 Chronicles 30:8, and by Stephen in Acts 7:51, contributing to his being stoned as the first Christian martyr. What does it mean? How would a “stiff-necked” 21st-century Christian behave?
3. Also in the Exodus passage: What does it mean for a person to be God’s “inheritance”?
4. Regarding the Matthew passage: Who are today’s false prophets? How can they be identified? Be avoided?

What Do the Texts Mean to Us?

1. Jesus’ admonition about how to avoid false prophets sounds easy. Is it?
2. What are some of the “fruits” that false prophets display today? What evidence?
3. How about Paul’s views about the “fruit of the Spirit”? How easy is that to achieve?
4. What do you and I do after this study series? What do we need to do with what we’ve learned?

