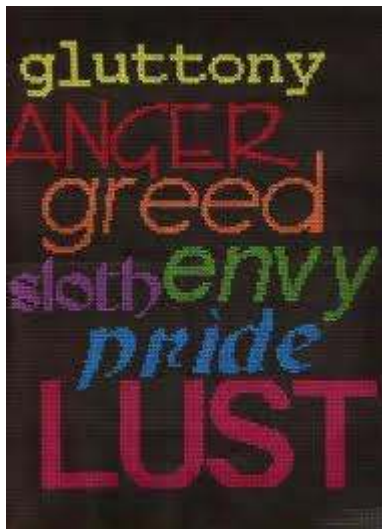


Seven Deadly Sins Sermon Series



The following daily devotions will help you to understand and overcome each of these areas of sin you may be confronted with.

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June 26 Lust / Chastity (Purity)

Prayer Tip:

A very helpful prayer practice is "praying the scriptures." Praying the scriptures is an opportunity to interact with a scripture passage and really think about what God is speaking to your heart through that passage. There are several ways to pray the scriptures but one way would be to choose a passage, write it out one sentence at a time, and then respond to each sentence as if dialoguing with God. Psalm 51 is a wonderful Psalm to pray scripturally. The first two sentences are below, with personal responses as an example of how this exercise works. Use the rest of Psalm 51 this week in your prayer time or choose one of the GPS passages we will be reading this week.

Psalm 51:1-2

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions (*Oh God, thank you for your love and forgiveness for me even when I make big mistakes*).

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin (*I have trouble, Lord, trying to be all you want me to be. Thank you for wiping my slate clean and giving me the opportunity to start anew every time I confess to you*).

—Rev. Laurie Barnes, Pastor of Prayer Ministries

Prayer: Dear God, I have an eye for beauty, especially in other humans, and a deep inner hunger for love. Our culture too often divorces those responses from your purity, love and commitment. What ugliness and pain they create if used wrongly! Forgive me for the times when I open my heart to the hollow allure of lust. Create in me a clean heart. Show me the joy of living and loving in the way you call me to. Amen.

MONDAY Galatians 5:19-23

This sweeping, incisive passage covers most of the issues we'll address during this sermon series. (We will revisit these verses in seven weeks, reflect on where we have grown, and on where we need God's help for further growth.) On the one side, immoral, impure actions are destructive. On the other, we find the love and joy that God intends for us.

- As we begin this series, take time for honest, prayerful self-appraisal. Which items in verses 19-21 do you find in your life? Do you agree with Paul that these stem from our human brokenness? Which of the fruits of the spirit in verses 22, 23 do you see growing in your life? Do you agree that these are godly characteristics?

- Which of the fruits of the Spirit do you see as helping to shield you from the impure actions listed in verses 19-21? How, if at all, do you open your heart to God's Spirit so God can grow that fruit in you? Have you recently been or done something that you wouldn't have been or done in the past—because you have been with Jesus?

TUESDAY Matthew 5:27-30

Jesus clearly laid out the moral dangers lust creates. Lust, he said, is first an inner issue, a heart problem. Jesus did not condemn sexual desire—Genesis 2:24 says that is a part of God's good creation. Jesus rebuked times when we focus on another person just as an object for our pleasure, not caring about that person's total well-being.

- The online *Encarta® World English Dictionary* defines lust as "the strong physical desire to have sex with somebody, usually without associated feelings of love or affection." Does this definition seem to you to fit with Jesus' teaching? Why or why not? What, if anything, do you believe Jesus might add to or subtract from this definition?
- Jesus had said it's your heart, more than your body, that commits adultery. So it's clear he wasn't really telling us to mutilate our bodies in verses 29, 30. What do you believe Jesus wanted his potent images to teach us about our inner life? What, if anything, would you change in your day-to-day life to take Jesus seriously?

WEDNESDAY 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

New Testament Christians lived in a world where lust and immorality were a given. In many Roman and Greek cities, "temples" sold the services of prostitutes! 1 Thessalonians is probably the earliest of Paul's letters that we have. He made it clear to his converts that God was calling them to break from their culture, and live in new ways.

- Compare and contrast the attitudes toward sex in the Greek and Roman world of New Testament times with attitudes in our world today. How has our culture shaped your own attitudes and life story, and those of people close to you? Do you believe that sex without love or commitment makes us happier or less happy?
- Notice the verbs Paul uses in verse 6, words that mean "harm" or "wrong" and "take advantage of." In what ways does this cast light on the type of spiritual damage from an impure life that he is warning against? How does this language speak to the idea that prostitution or promiscuity are "victimless" activities?

THURSDAY Colossians 3:1-10

Human resolve alone will not produce the inner purity God desires. Living a pure life is not a matter of "gritting our teeth" and "just saying no." Our life, Paul wrote, is already hidden with Christ in God. Our outward actions flow from God graciously accepting and loving us. Inner renewal, not just outward conformity, is God's calling for us.

- What are some practices you have found that help you set your mind on things above? What activities or settings seem to draw your attention away from God? How do you expect that your inner life might change as you more fully live out Christ's love and grace, rather than religious rules or social pressures?
- Paul says that a Christian has taken off the old self, with its practices, and put on a new self. Can you see places where this has happened in your life? (This is often harder for those who have been "good" all their lives, but it matters for all of us.) Where does your "old self" still give you trouble?

FRIDAY 2 Peter 1:3-9

Peter says movingly that God's forgiveness and divine love give us the inner power we need to escape the corruption that is in the world. Much like Galatians 5, verses 5 through 7 list the positive virtues God offers us. Add these things to your life, Peter says. They will keep you from an empty, barren existence.

- Peter makes the sweeping claim that God has given us everything we need for a godly life. Which of the positive qualities he lists in verses 5 through 7 do you find most appealing? How can you more completely connect with God's spiritual power to add these things to your life?
- Peter calls on us to claim these positive qualities in increasing measure. Which of these qualities, if any, do you find already present in your life? Thank God for them! Then ask God to guide you to see any places where you could add an increasing measure of that virtue, to make your life and influence even better.

SATURDAY

Personal Application: "The very first thing that we are to do with sin is not to point to it in others but...to confess it in ourselves." (William Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, p. 30) "Confession" is not obsessive self-hatred. It's the healthy habit of honestly accepting God's grace to sinners (Psalm 32, James 5:16, 1 John 1:8-10). How have you felt the power of lust? Confess it to God openly. If it's harming you or others, visit www.cor.org/celebraterecovery to find help.

Family Activity: Make a family ice cream sundae. You will need a large dish, favorite ice cream flavor(s), syrup, nuts, candy, whipped cream, and sprinkles. You'll also need a bowl and spoon for each person. Read Colossians 3:12-14 aloud. Discuss each virtue and give examples. Read the passage aloud again as you make the sundae, following this "recipe:"

- God's holy people...dearly loved—one scoop of ice cream per person
 - Compassion—syrup
 - Kindness—syrup
 - Humility—nuts
 - Gentleness—candy
 - Patience—whipped cream
 - Over all these virtues put on love—colored sprinkles
- As you eat the sundae, ask God to help you fill your life with goodness.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, show me what is in my heart. Replace anything displeasing to you and fill my heart with your love. Let that love motivate and penetrate all my thoughts, words and actions. I give you my heart and my life. Help me to have a strong desire to live in your grace and freedom. Amen.

July 3 Greed / Generosity

Prayer Tip:

My friends in the Roman Catholic Church pray the Rosary on a daily basis. The word "rosary" comes from the Latin word for "garland of roses" and refers to both the prayer itself and the prayer beads that are used as a devotional aid.

Recently a friend of mine gave me what she called an "Ecumenical Rosary." It is a circular bracelet with 10 large beads interspersed with 11 knots. Similar to the Rosary, this Ecumenical Rosary has a cross as the central feature. Instead of fixed prayers to pray, however, the instructions I received with it give me great freedom to choose what I want each bead to represent. For example, each bead could remind me of a specific Bible verse I have committed to memory. There is no better way to keep scripture "memory verses" in your mind than to say them on a regular basis. If I wanted to, I could use the Lord's Prayer at each one of the knots, or maybe some other short prayer, such as a breath prayer or the Jesus prayer. I have not yet assigned prayers and/or scripture verses to the beads and knots on my Ecumenical Rosary, but I intend to start this week as we observe Memorial Day. Memorial Day reminds us of those who have gone on before us. What better way to remember our mentors in the faith and significant family members than recalling scripture verses that may have been important to them. My husband's grandmother loved John 3:16, so one of my beads may be that verse. Portions of Psalm 91 comforted my grandmother, so I may use that for another bead. I look forward to making this Ecumenical Rosary a prayer and devotional tool of my own.

If you do not have an Ecumenical Rosary or other devotional beads, take the time to choose 5 meaningful scripture verses you would either like to commit to memory or already have memorized. Take time in your GPS reading/prayer time each day to recite and reflect on those memory verses. Why are they special to you? What do they teach you about God? About God's relationship with people? If you don't yet know 5 scriptures to choose, read your GPS readings closely and seek 5 verses that you would like to learn. You will be blessed to have at least 5 scriptures in your memory bank and can always add more as you continue on your faith journey. The key is finding a way to fix them in your memory.

—Rev. Laurie Barnes, Pastor of Prayer Ministries

Prayer: Dear Jesus, the Memorial Day observance this week reminds me of those who have selflessly given themselves for our safety and freedom. It also reminds me that you selflessly gave your life for my sake. As I remember your generosity, teach me how to live increasingly into that great virtue in my own life. Help me grow into a truly cheerful giver. Amen.

MONDAY Luke 12:13-21

How much do you need? Both Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5 identify greed as a type of "idolatry," of loving something more than God. Jesus' sad parable reminds us that our life is not about how much we have. The day comes for all when the only question is, "Who will get all the 'stuff' I've accumulated?"

- One option never seems to occur to the man in Jesus' story. He never says, "I've got more than enough. Maybe I'll give some of it away." How easy or hard is it for you to be generous with the money, time or "stuff" you have? What wishes or fears get in the way of generosity?
- How do you understand Jesus' challenging phrase about being "rich toward God"? What steps can you take, in your day-to-day life, to increase this kind of inner wealth in your life? How can you share that approach to life with your children or other people with whom you have some influence?

TUESDAY Deuteronomy 15:7-11

God called the people of Israel to a level of generosity that neither they nor we have ever fully lived up to. Jesus quoted part of this passage—“The poor will always be with you.” Some would use those words to argue against generosity. That argument only works if we ignore the whole second half of verse 11!

- In verse 10 we find an idea that we’ll see again in this week’s reading. As in so many areas of life, God doesn’t just care about what we do, but about the spirit in which we do it. With what kind of spirit do you do your giving? What, if anything, have you found that increases your joy in giving?
- In his book *Seven*, Jeff Cook suggests that greed is about getting (and hoarding) more than you need, while gluttony (next week!) is about consuming too much. How do you understand the “evil thoughts” against which Deuteronomy warns? What rewards might come with the type of generosity these verses call for?

WEDNESDAY 1 Timothy 6:3-10

In New Testament times, as today, some people saw religious teaching as simply one more chance for profit. The solution to their greed, and ours, this letter says, is not just outward changes in behavior. The key is inside of us. True wealth comes from a contented spirit, not our wallet or our bank account.

- Verse 7 states a basic premise for the whole Bible’s teaching about greed. How “permanent” do some of your main possessions feel to you? How vital is that sense of permanence to your inner security? How has your inner “need” for your possessions changed during the current economic crisis, if at all?
- In verse 10, we read that “the love of money” (not money itself) is the root of all kinds of evil. Who have you known, if anyone, who had plenty of money but seemed free of “the love of money”? Have you known (or been) a person who, even if living in relative poverty, felt the tug of “the love of money”?

THURSDAY Matthew 19:16 - 20:16

In today’s first story, a young man asked Jesus how to find eternal life. When Jesus told him to break the grip his assets had on his heart, the young man went away sad. Jesus told a second story, a parable, that illustrates God’s vast generosity to us. It also shows how easily we slip into greed and resentment.

- Many affluent people in the Bible (e.g. Abraham in the Old Testament, Lydia the seller of royal purple cloth in the New Testament—see Acts 16) were NOT told to sell all they had. What heart issue do you believe Jesus wanted the young man to address? What made it hard for him to respond to Jesus’ call?
- Which group of workers do you most identify with in Jesus’ story—the ones who worked all day, or the late arrivals? For what reasons? How does your heart respond when the landowner asks if you are going to be upset when he is generous to others? Do you find God’s “unfair” generosity a curse or a blessing?

FRIDAY 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

Paul was gathering a gift for the Christians in Jerusalem. He was more concerned with the heart from which people gave, though, than with the amount collected. “God loves a cheerful giver” was not just an upbeat slogan. It was a serious call to check why they gave—“do not give reluctantly or under compulsion,” he said. Give generously!

- What influences and ways of thinking most strengthen your generous tendencies? What influences and fears pull you away from generosity? How can you reinforce generosity in your heart and your life? How, if at all, have you found your life better when you are generous?
- Have you ever found yourself giving reluctantly or under compulsion? How did that experience affect you? What do you think were Paul’s reasons for valuing cheerful hearts and willing spirits even over the positives of collecting a larger offering? Do you agree with him?

SATURDAY

Personal:

The *New Bible Dictionary* says confession “means to acknowledge sin and guilt in the light of God’s revelation, and is thus...an outward sign of repentance and faith” (p. 219). In what ways has the inner tug of greed shaped your actions and attitudes? Confess that honestly to God. Pray about how God can work in your life to bring healing, and open your heart more and more to the joy and freedom of generosity.

Family Activity:

Adults, gather a bunch of pennies and hide them throughout your home. Place a bowl in the center of the room. Have your children hunt for the pennies. (Pennies can be a choking hazard, so supervise any very young children.) Let each child place the pennies he or she collected in the bowl. Ask, “If this was all the money our family had, what would you do with it?” Read aloud Mark 12:41-44 and 2 Corinthians 9:7. Ask,

“Why do you think Jesus wants us to share? How does God want us to feel when we give?” Decide where you will give the pennies. Pray for the people who will receive them and thank God for your blessings. Talk with your children about the importance of generosity and contentment.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, in my head I know that my life doesn't consist in the abundance of my possessions and that I need to give generously. But I confess these are hard ideas to put into practice. I want to live as one who gives with a cheerful heart—but I don't know where to begin. Change my heart where it needs changing, and give me the courage to begin to develop the contented spirit that I know you want me to have. Amen.

July 10 Gluttony / Temperance (Self-Control)

Prayer Tip:

Prayerfully read Philippians 2:1-11. This rich passage of scripture reminds us of who Christ is and what he gave up to fulfill God's plan of salvation for us. As we consider the roots and the impact of the deadly sin of “gluttony” this week, prayerfully examine what you might need to give up in order to fulfill God's purposes for you. Consider practicing the spiritual discipline of fasting as a way of drawing closer to God. In the Bible, every time but one that fasting is mentioned, it is coupled with prayer. (The exception is in the book of Esther.) Different kinds of fasting are also mentioned in the Bible. You could appropriately fast from a single meal, from all food for a day or for certain foods for a period of time. You might consider fasting each day until after you have read and reflected on your GPS reading. While fasting, it is important to keep hydrated and also to consult a physician to make sure that fasting will not endanger your health. As you fast, ask God to help you center your life on Him, not on food or other distractions of our world. The goal of Biblical fasting is not dieting, but to better focus your heart and mind on God. Consider beginning and ending your time of fasting by reading Philippians 2:1-11.

—Rev. Laurie Barnes, Pastor of Prayer Ministries

Prayer: Dear God, bless me with a good appetite for you. Jesus said that we do not live by bread alone, but I'm aware that sometimes I let my appetites take your place at the center of my life. Empower me to marshal and direct my energies wisely in my eating, and in my life as a whole. I choose to value the freedom you offer above my physical appetite. Amen.

MONDAY Matthew 23:25-28

Jesus defied many of the legalistic rules and rituals the religious leaders demanded in his day. He also, however, opposed their efforts to look pious while privately living self-indulgent lives. People would whitewash tombs as a warning, because touching a grave could cause ritual defilement. But whitewash or no, there was still a corpse inside.

- Greed may lead us to simply buy and hoard stuff, even if it sits unused. Gluttony and self-indulgence, on the other hand, are about consuming. How can gluttony tug at people (like religious leaders) who might fear being caught in sins like lust or wrath? What inner and social forces make gluttony “respectable”?
- If gluttony was, in some ways, a relatively “respectable” sin, why did Jesus use such strong language? What made the self-indulgence of the religious leaders hypocritical? In what ways can an addiction to consumption (of food or other pleasures) be like a dead body at the center of a person's life?

TUESDAY Proverbs 23:19-21

Biblical wisdom saw gluttony, in all of its forms, as sapping our life's energy. Gluttony is not about weight or body shape. It's about trying to satisfy our appetite for anything (food, power, fun, even beauty or thinness!) in ways that put that desire at the center of life. In gluttony, we end up serving a false god.

- When is indulging in too much food, or anything else, a coping behavior, a symptom of a deeper inner pain or problem? Under what conditions can the urge to consume too much become a problem in itself, rather than a symptom? How effectively can trust in God help us in either of these situations?
- We've seen the trend in the last decade for American restaurants, from fast-food drive-throughs to fine-dining establishments, to “supersize” portions. Does this tactic appeal to you as a customer? Why or why not? In what ways, if any, does it relate to the subject of “gluttony”?

WEDNESDAY Colossians 2:16-23

Facing any of the deadly sins, our first thought often is, "Let's make strict rules, for ourselves and others." We tend to think the key to too much indulgence might be a strict diet — "don't touch, don't taste, don't handle." Paul tells the Christians in Colossae that just abiding by outward rules leaves the root problem untouched.

- Regulations, Paul says, seem wise, but in themselves they do not change our inner desires. Have you ever tried to put yourself on a strict program (for any purpose) when you had not inwardly "bought in" to what you were doing? What were the results? Why does inward change generally precede lasting outward change?
- The "rule-makers" Paul described were pressuring or judging the Colossians for not following their rules. Do you mainly view others with concern and insight, or with criticism and judgment? In what ways do our efforts to control one another cast light on our tendency to want to stand in God's place?

THURSDAY Titus 2:11-14

Paul says the point of self-control is not to take good things out of life, but to free us to live effectively and joyfully for God. Self-control serves the same purpose as the brakes or steering on a car. They aren't to eliminate the car's power and speed. Instead, they direct the car, making the power and speed useful and effective.

- Do you more often equate the words "self-control" with joy and freedom, or with a sense of deprivation and sadness? What patterns or models have shaped your response to the words (and the idea) of self-control? How can God help you to value more fully the positive impact of self-control on your life?
- Jesus gave himself to "redeem" us from all wickedness (v. 14). The Greek version of the Old Testament used the Greek word for "redeem" to describe God freeing Israel from slavery in Egypt. In what ways are you finding greater freedom in your life? Are you feeling the Spirit's nudge in any area where you are still in "slavery"?

FRIDAY Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus invited us to trust that God really cares for us. In God's hands, he said, we are safe for all eternity, no matter what challenges this life brings. He saw, as we often do not, that our obsession with food and clothing is usually rooted in fear. We consume more and more (and more) now, because we fear that sometime we may not have enough.

- Which of the good things in your life do you believe you have because of God's care and generosity? Which of them do you believe you have because of your hard work, initiative, drive or careful planning? Do you see God as having any part in your ability to work hard, show initiative or do careful planning?
- Jesus says that those who do not know God worry constantly about day-to-day things like food and clothing. In what ways, if any, have you sensed that your commitment to Jesus has reduced the "worry quotient" in your life? What additional burdens of worry would you like to ask Jesus to help you lay aside?

SATURDAY

Personal:

"If we say that we have not sinned, we are fooling ourselves, and the truth isn't in our hearts. But if we confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and take our sins away." (1 John 1:8, 9, *Contemporary English Version*) Confess to God any areas where gluttony has controlled you, and ask the Holy Spirit to grow self-control in your life. Need help? Check out www.cor.org/celebraterecovery.

Family Activity:

Read Psalm 139:14. Discuss how our bodies are one of God's wonderful creations. Share ways we care for our bodies. Talk about ways we can improve how we care for our bodies by eating healthier foods, and a healthful amount of them. Review the five food groups and healthy amounts of each at MyPyramid.gov. Create a family food pyramid. Using magazines and grocery ads, cut out pictures of foods from each of the food groups. Glue the pictures onto posterboard in the shape of a pyramid, keeping the foods from each food group together. Pay attention to the portion sizes in each food group. Display your pyramid. Thank God for food and ask for help in eating healthfully.

Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for opening my eyes this week to examine honestly my tendency toward self-indulgence. Instead of self, Lord, I desire to be consumed by my love for You. Thank you for promising to set me free from anything that is not You and is not from You. Help me always to seek first Your kingdom and Your righteousness. Amen.

July 17

Sloth (Indifference/Apathy) / Concern (Engagement/Effort)

Prayer Tip:

Summertime is here and it is a great time to start walking! Walking is not only a good form of physical exercise but it can be a great spiritual exercise as well. The next time you walk, consider prayer walking in your neighborhood. No advance preparation is required and no words need to be spoken aloud. As you walk, you can silently pray for the neighbors you know as well as those you don't know. God knows the circumstances of all you encounter on your walk and will provide for each family according to their needs.

Pray for healing for those who are sick, comfort for those who are grieving, jobs for those who need work and peace for homes where there is strife. When you spot toys in the yard or a basketball hoop in the driveway, pray for the children and youth who use those toys. Pray that God would help parents and guardians guide and direct the children in their care. Pray for protection from predators, gangs and addictions for these young people. As you walk and pray, consider using praise and worship songs and invite God's light to permeate any darkness. Prayer walking in our neighborhoods is a great way to actively live out God's commandment to love our neighbor(s) as ourselves!

—Rev. Laurie Barnes, Pastor of Prayer Ministries

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you said those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed. Forgive me for those times when I am apathetic your presence in my life. Help me see more clearly the unique self you can already see me as being. Teach me to hear your voice more clearly, and then to have a gritty, engaged will to follow you. Amen.

MONDAY Proverbs 6:6-11

Long before Disney and Pixar created "A Bug's Life," the Hebrew wisdom writers saw how diligently ants work. In this bit of wisdom, they encouraged all of us to learn from the ants. Our driven culture often works hard, but sometimes in a spirit that sees retirement and days off as the only truly good times. Perhaps we, too, can learn from the ants.

- William Willimon notes that "surely sloth is one sin of which we pragmatic, hard-working, high-achieving, Mother-I'd-rather-do-it-myself Americans are not guilty." What's your attitude toward the work you do, in paid and/or unpaid settings? Do you tend to love it too much, too little, or some of both?
- 4th-century monks known as "the Desert fathers" led out in naming sloth as a sin. They compared the lethargy that comes at midday in a hot climate to the state of mind and heart they called "sloth." What are some ways you've seen people "drowse" their way through life? How do attentiveness and energy enrich life?

TUESDAY Matthew 9:35-38

Jesus worked tirelessly at God's work of restoring people to physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness. He was "a man on a mission." The Church of the Resurrection's "DNA" as a congregation springs from Jesus' actions and teaching. Like Jesus, we believe the harvest is plentiful. God calls us to bring our true selves to helping gather that harvest.

- How does Matthew state the reason for the compassion Jesus felt when he saw the crowds? To what extent do you think "harassed and helpless...sheep without a shepherd" expresses the spiritual state of your neighbors, co-workers, even people you see in church? How much do you care about their spiritual well-being?
- How does Matthew describe the work Jesus did? If he had preached good news, but not healed anyone, how do you think that would have altered his effectiveness? What about if he had healed people (physically, emotionally or spiritually), but not told anyone about God's Kingdom?

WEDNESDAY Luke 24:45-53, Acts 1:3-8

Luke wrote two New Testament books to tell the story of Jesus and the early church: the gospel of Luke, and the book of Acts. After he rose from the dead, and as he ascended, Jesus told his followers to wait for God's power to lead them. Then they would need to exert all their effort, working with God, to carry out the divine purpose.

- What's the difference between waiting for God's power and being trapped in apathy or sloth? Why does it matter to wait for God's direction, rather than rushing frantically to take up a task in our own power and wisdom? How can God help you, as Romans 12:3 says, to think of yourself "with sober judgment"?
- When they heard these words, the disciples were in Jerusalem. Judea was the province around them; Samaria the next province north. "To the ends of the earth" meant pretty much then what it means now. Do you have a sense of where God is calling you to serve? How might God show you this?

THURSDAY 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Paul the apostle was resolute about living up to God's call on his life. He gives us a model of engagement and energy. He was willing to adapt and stretch, if it meant reaching people for Christ. He used the foot races and the boxing, major features of the Olympic games of his day, to show how seriously he pursued God's mission.

- Some people are uneasy with this passage. They think Paul was talking about being “phony” in dealing with others. What do you think—was Paul inauthentic, or truly eager to connect with people unlike himself? How can you be true to yourself, and still genuinely enter into the lives and concerns of others?
- We understand an athlete training intensely for a big event. In fact, we often criticize an athlete who doesn’t seem quite prepared. What is the life-long “event” for which Paul was training, and calling us to train? How do you train spiritually—what are your Christian equivalents of an athlete’s training?

FRIDAY Hebrews 6:7-12

The writer of Hebrews knew we don’t become deeply committed followers of God by chance. The letter calls us to be active in living a godly life, and not to just drift along. As we discern who we are, and how we are equipped to bear fruit for God, we find the true joy and energy of life. We discover “life to the full,” as Jesus described it in John 10:10.

- In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders v. 11 as “I want each of you to extend that same intensity toward a full-bodied hope, and keep at it till the finish.” What are the things you pursue most intensely right now? How can that intensity and focus translate into your spiritual life?
- Hebrews encourages us to imitate those who have shown great faith and patience before us. Read Hebrews 11, and from the list of “heroes of faith” in that chapter choose one or two Bible characters that particularly inspire you to live for God with energy and authenticity.

SATURDAY

Personal:

“Repentance...involves...turning away from those actions and attitudes that are offensive to God...(1 Sam. 7:3; Jer. 4:1; Ezek. 14:6). It naturally includes the confession of sin...(Joel 2:12–13; Jer. 3:13).” (Alexander & Rosner. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (electronic ed.). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001.) Confess your struggles with sloth to God. If you need to, talk with your pastor or a counselor about how to discover your “child of God self,” finding the inner joy of living into God’s calling for you.

Family Activity:

Read Matthew 9: 36-37. Review your family calendar. Consider the following questions: do the ways you spend your time and energy as a family reflect your Christian values? How often do you spend an evening watching television compared with how often you serve others? How is your family growing towards becoming deeply committed Christians? In your daily lives, in what ways are you seeking to know, love and serve God? As a family, discuss one or two changes you can make towards spending your time and energy more wisely. Thank God for the gift of time and ask God for guidance and wisdom in how to use it for Him.

Prayer:

Lord, I want to keep making progress in my spiritual life but I sometimes lose sight of the goal. Help me understand the goal of the Christian life better. Help me discern where I need to be exerting my energies. Is it time for me to take action? If so, on what? Direct my path, O Lord, and give me the energy to move forward in my journey to know, love and serve you. Amen.

July 24

Wrath (Anger/Rage) / Mercy (Patience/Love)

Prayer Tip:

An excellent study for working through forgiveness issues is “Companions in Christ: The Way of Forgiveness.” One of the exercises in the study involves reading Matthew 18:23-35 and then journaling in reflection on such questions as:

- Whom have you thrown into your “debtor’s prison” of unforgiveness?
 - What does your prison look or feel like?
 - What is your “cost/benefit” of maintaining the prison?
 - What would it look or feel like to set your prisoners free?

Mentally explore in your prison of unforgiveness, and pray the Lord's Prayer. Pause and reflect on the passage that reminds us to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

—Rev. Laurie Barnes, Pastor of Prayer Ministries

Prayer: Dear Jesus, when you lived here, you showed anger—and got it right. Evil made you angry—innocent people getting hurt, pious people who misrepresented God. I show anger, too—but I often get it wrong. Things that hurt my ego, others who get something I want, or small hassles that upset my plans make me angry. Help me be angry about the things that make you angry. But help me, also, to live with your patience and mercy. Amen.

MONDAY Genesis 4:1-10

This is a primal story of tragedy. Cain is angry, with his brother Abel and with God. God warns Cain that the anger he holds in his heart has lethal risks. But Cain ignores God's message, plots to act out his anger against his brother, and kills him. Sadly God says, "Your brother's blood cries to me from the ground."

- The story gives few details. We don't know how much time passed from the offerings to the murder, or just why God did not view Cain's gift favorably. The focus is internal. What was the spiritual danger against which God warned Cain? How does the image of sin "crouching" in wait (v. 7) fit with your experience?
- When God asked Cain where his brother was, what was Cain's callous answer? Do Cain's words in this ancient story ever echo the way that you are tempted to deal with the results of your anger? What does the story tell you about God's attention to actions and situations we'd like to gloss over?

TUESDAY Ephesians 4:22-32

Today's text says Christians can be angry without sinning (v. 26). At the same time, it calls us to rid our lives of destructive bitterness, rage and anger (v. 31). We need to think clearly about anger. Jesus showed that there are evils that should make us angry (Mark 3:1-6, John 2:14-17). But directed wrongly, anger is toxic to us and to others.

- John Wesley once wrote that if he could gather one-hundred people who "hate nothing but sin," he could shake the world. List some of the kinds of evil in the world that you believe make God angry. What do you believe are some of the main characteristics of "righteous anger"?
- James 1:19, 20 says we should be "slow to become angry, because OUR anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." In what ways do you think harmful, human anger differs from the kind of "good anger" Jesus showed? How can we keep the one from turning into the other?

WEDNESDAY 1 Samuel 20:30-34, 2 Samuel 9:1-8

These stories vividly show the difference between anger and mercy. In the first, Saul feared David's military skill and rising status. In a rage, he even tried to kill his son Jonathan for being David's friend. In the second, when David became king, he sought out Saul's descendant, not to take revenge, but to show him compassion.

- Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." How likely are you to buy and wear a T-shirt that says, "I don't get mad—I get even," and mean it? Do you find David's mercy to his enemy's grandson admirable or weak?
- When Saul's grandson arrived, King David's first words were, "Don't be afraid." Do you think those were just polite words, or do you think Mephibosheth needed to hear them? How do they foreshadow the mercy of David's Lord and descendant, Jesus, who often greeted people by saying, "Fear not"?

THURSDAY Luke 10:25-37

The religious expert knew he should love his "neighbor." However, he seemed to think (or hope?) that left room for NOT loving lots of people. Jesus' story asks, "What if everyone might be a neighbor?" What if I'm willing to offer true help (avoiding codependency or reinforced helplessness) to any person I can, no matter who they are?

- Centuries of anger and fear divided Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day. Are there long-standing divisions that affect you personally (business enmity, family disputes, maybe even a sports rivalry)? How easy or hard do you find it to treat the person(s) on the other side of those rifts as your neighbor?
- Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of his story. That was like telling an Israeli today a story in which the hero is a Palestinian. Was Jesus naïve to think that it's possible to move beyond long-standing anger and hatred between people groups? How did his approach differ from human peace-making efforts?

FRIDAY Luke 15:11-32

There's anger in this story. There's rash anger, when the younger son demands his legacy and leaves home. There's bitter anger as the older brother fumes outside when the father takes the younger son back. But the story hinges on the father's mercy and love. He probably had the most cause to be angry—but he wasn't.

- In what ways, if any, have you felt the kind of rash, impatient anger that the younger son in this story felt? In what ways, if any, have you felt the older brother's bitter, envious anger? Jesus told this story to tell us about God. How did the father show mercy to both sons? How has God been merciful to you?
- Have you ever had to deal with someone who has hurt you in some way, but has now "come home"? What issues and struggles did you face in deciding whether and how to show mercy? How can you show mercy to someone who has hurt you without "stuffing" your own pain, leaving it to fester in the dark?

SATURDAY

Personal:

The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* says confession includes admitting our helplessness and sin, declaring God's saving acts, which rescue us from our troubles, and offering praise and thanks to the God who shows mercy to us. Confess your struggles with destructive anger (against yourself, others or God) to God. If you need help moving through them, talk with a pastor or counselor. Remember to give praise for God's mercy to you.

Family Activity:

Read Ephesians 4: 29, 31-32. Discuss the meaning of "unwholesome talk." How does this happen in your family? How do bitterness, rage and anger reveal themselves among you? Brainstorm a list of healthy ways to express your anger. Maybe you can punch a pillow, exercise, throw water balloons, write out your feelings or draw a picture. Calming activities such as counting to ten, reading and praying can be included, too. Create a list of positive words and phrases to share, along with ways to be kind and compassionate to one another. Ask each person to choose one family member to focus on encouraging this coming week. Ask God and one another for forgiveness and for help in growing more patient and loving.

Prayer:

By your unfailing love and great compassion, have mercy on me, O God. I confess that I have sinned against you and others and I am sorry for my thoughts, words and deeds that hurt others, hurt myself or hurt my relationship with you. Cleanse me from my sin and create in me a new heart and a steadfast spirit to make a fresh start. Going forward, help me to be kind, compassionate and forgiving. Amen.

July 31

Pride / Humility

Prayer Tip:

What does true humility look like? How can we be sure we are "not looking to our own interests," and are indeed seeking God's will in our lives above everything else?

The Wesley Covenant Prayer, familiar to many here at the Church of the Resurrection, provides a good description of humility and lack of pride, and is a prayer any of us may pray when we seek to bring our view of ourselves in line with God's will:

"I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."

—Jennifer Creager, Resurrection Prayer Ministries

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you were compassionate with people who saw themselves too often as "being" wrong and bad, as missing the mark. You were honest with people who proudly saw themselves as "being" right and good, always hitting that mark. Be an accurate mirror to me, Lord, reflecting who I am and where I need your grace and instruction in my life. Amen.

MONDAY Proverbs 16:18-22

The sages of Israel taught that wisdom points us toward humility, while pride and folly form a "package deal." To have a view of ourselves that is neither too high nor too low reflects a God-given discernment. Pride is not a form of sound confidence, but self-deception, and it sets us up for a fall.

- Verse 20 says, “Those who listen to instruction prosper.” How does pride keep us from hearing wise instruction? Can you remember a time when you had to set aside your pride to accept God’s principles as a wiser way to live? When, if ever, did you “take a tumble” because pride kept you from listening to God or others?
- “Pride goes before destruction” may just be a sensible observation of how life works. Verse 19 makes a value judgment: “Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.” Do you agree—would living humbly with the needy be better than “living high” with the proud? Why or why not?

TUESDAY John 9:13-41

Jesus met a man who was blind from birth, and gave him sight. The religious leaders, sure of their spiritual authority, tried to deny the fact of a healing everyone could see. Pride blinded them to God in their midst, when Jesus didn’t act as they thought God should. Pride blinds us, too, to the needs of others, and to ourselves and our need for a Savior.

- In verse 25, you may recognize the line John Newton used centuries later when he wrote “Amazing Grace.” In what parts of your spiritual life is this your testimony—what do you now see to which you were once blind? How can realizing that God is the source of your spiritual sight protect against pride?
- How did pride blind the religious leaders in this case (v. 16, 18, 24, 28, 29, 34, and 40)? How can you hold clear beliefs without letting them turn into the kind of blinding pride the Pharisees had? Can you recall a time when a spiritual “truth” you “knew” turned out to be partial, or simply false?

WEDNESDAY Philippians 2:1-11

Verses 6-11 probably quote a hymn the early Christians used in their worship. The challenge comes in the early part of the passage. Paul didn’t just call us to admire Jesus’ humble spirit. He invited us to change our ways of thinking, to have the “same mind” in us. We can find a new way of “being” as we follow Jesus’ humble, self-emptying pattern.

- Verses 3-4 depict the Christian alternative to “vain conceit” as “in humility valuing others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” Would living that way make you feel safe or unsafe? What trust-building steps could help you move toward that ideal in your key relationships?
- The gospels show a strong, often forceful Jesus—not the cliché view of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” Yet Paul says Jesus did not view equality with God as something to use for his own advantage. For whose end(s) did Jesus use his equality with God? How did he empty himself, laying aside his divine rights?

THURSDAY Philippians 3:3-14

Paul didn’t just talk about the humility of Jesus. He was living into that himself. It’s easy to forget that, before he met Jesus, Paul had a promising career as a member of the Jewish ruling council. “I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done” (verse 7, *New Living Translation*).

- Though Paul had other, lesser goals and dreams (e.g. Romans 15:23-28), what words does he use to express the greatest goal in his life? What changed in his attitudes and his way of living when he made knowing Christ his supreme goal? On your list of personal goals, where does knowing Christ rank?
- Verses 8-9 say “all I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him” (*The Message*). What basis for self-worth (other than relying on his own accomplishments) did Paul claim? To what extent are you able to find your value where he did?

FRIDAY 1 Peter 5:1-7

Peter asked early Christian converts (and us) to find the freedom that comes from humility with each other and trust in God. Too often, we’re tempted to link freedom with “I always get my way.” No, says Peter—relate to each other humbly, and trust your anxieties to God. As we mark Independence Day tomorrow, that kind of freedom is worth pondering.

- James 3:13-15 names “bitter envy” and “selfish ambition” as being the reverse of the humility that comes from wisdom. How have you seen pride tend to produce bitter envy or selfish ambition in you or people you know? How does humility guard your heart from these hurtful ways of thinking?
- Is it possible to act with confidence (in a church ministry, your work, your family, or just your own life) out of humility rather than pride? What attitudes or actions do you need to make that a reality? How can mutual humility smooth dealings between followers and leaders?

SATURDAY

Personal:

“Declare it all’ advised the desert fathers, those radical early Christians....Declare it all—every thought, every feeling, every cruel intention, every ignoble desire and holy aspiration. Don’t be afraid to present anything to God...[whose] comprehending, compassionate love knows how to heal your distempers.” (Morris, *Provocative Grace*) Declare independence from pride by “declaring it all” to God. Get any help you need from a therapist or pastor.

Family Activity:

Read James 4:10. Winning a prize or an award can cause a person to feel very proud. Invite each family member to bring something that symbolizes an accomplishment he or she has achieved. Ask family members to share how they earned their awards and how they felt afterwards. Ask what God’s role was in the process of having achieved each goal. Discuss differences between pride and humility. How does confidence fit in? How can we feel good about reaching goals while embodying a spirit of humility? Ask each family member to set a new, personal goal of some kind. Discuss how we can focus on Christ while working toward a goal. As individuals reach their goals, pray for humility and praise God for each success.

Prayer:

O God, you call us to trust you and your plan for our lives. Help us put aside our own prideful planning to seek your will and your wisdom, giving ourselves completely to you so you may be glorified in every aspect of our lives. Amen.

Aug 7

Envy / Kindness (Grace)

Prayer Tip:

Two kinds of prayer are the essential weapons in the battle against our natural inclination toward envy: thankfulness and intercession. To help us treasure our lives and all the blessings we have been given, it is important to offer praise and thanksgiving for those things—the large and the small. Begin a list in your prayer journal or calendar. List at least five things you are thankful for every day. These can be anything from your loved ones to the beauty of a single flower outside your window. Each day, as you thank God for the blessings and gifts in your life, you will look less and less at other lives in envious comparison.

The second weapon against envy is prayer for others. Who do you envy? Pray for that person or persons every day. Ask God to help you see that person the way God does, with the kind of love that never keeps score, full of kindness and delight in the good things in their life.

When we pray for others God helps us share God’s love with them—the kind of love we can never come up with by ourselves.

—Jennifer Creager, Resurrection Prayer Ministries

Prayer: O God, thank you for valuing me, even when I struggle to value myself. Help me to love myself as you have loved me. Give me contentment in being the person you’ve made me to be, and in serving you and others the ways I am gifted to do. Then help me to love my neighbor as I love myself. I thank you that your ways are so much higher and greater than mine. Amen.

MONDAY Psalm 73:1-26

Envy warped this psalmist’s perceptions, and nearly led to spiritual ruin. Envy made the lives of others seem ideal—no troubles at all (verses 3-5). Envy looked only at current conditions, and made serving God seem futile (verses 11, 13). When the psalmist brought eternity into the picture, life came back into clearer spiritual focus (verses 21-26).

- For this psalmist, it was “the prosperity of the wicked” that nearly caused him to give up faith in God. But envy can also strike when we look at other believers (see Mark 10:35-41). Whose position, possessions or prospects do you envy? When you examine the thoughts behind the envy, do you think they are accurate?
- At what times in your life, if any, have you asked, “Does the Most High know anything?” (v. 11) How does the psalmist’s way of resolving envy in verses 21-26 speak to your heart? What have you found that helps you value the eternal over the finite, and the divine over the human?

TUESDAY Psalm 23:1-6

This beloved psalm never looks at what anyone else has. It rejoices in the abundance that comes from God’s presence with the psalmist—a reality each of us can experience. Envy, said Aquinas, grieves when something good happens to our neighbor. H. L. Mencken said that, in America, “contentment is making \$10 a month more than your brother-in-law”!

- Verse 1 is traditionally translated “I shall not want.” Modern versions say, “I have all I need,” or “I lack nothing.” Since this psalm seems to reflect David’s days as a shepherd, rather than as King of Israel, how do you believe it defines “need”? How often can you honestly say you feel that you have all you need?
- Reread verses 4-6. After each phrase, ask yourself, “Is this true of me?” Consider how important of each of these things is, compared to the items at the top of your current personal “wish list.” Thank God for each phrase you have internalized, that you can honestly say you believe.

WEDNESDAY 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Paul described Christians as a “body,” with Jesus Christ as the head. Feet, hands, eyes and internal organs each have a unique role to play in our physical body. God calls you to fill the role(s) in the Body of Christ you are best equipped to fill. Being content with serving as the “body part” you truly are is the best way to find joy and effectiveness.

- Usually we do okay in the body of Christ at living out “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.” We pray for each other, and show caring in various ways. What have you experienced as far as “if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it”? How do you feel when someone else is honored, especially if your role feels unseen?
- Paul’s image of jealous, moping body parts (verses 15-18) becomes funny if you try to picture such a thing really happening with your hands or feet. Of course, it WAS really happening among the Christians in Corinth. It’s been happening ever since. When have you seen envy limit a group’s, or a person’s, usefulness?

THURSDAY 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love does not envy, Paul writes. How could it? Love does not delight in evil—but one of envy’s worst qualities is the hidden delight we feel when something bad happens to a person we envy. Love keeps no record of wrongs—envy is fixated on keeping score. Love is kind—sadly, envy feels that it can’t afford the luxury of kindness.

- In which, if any, of your day-to-day relationships are you able to live out most of the qualities of love that Paul lists readily and easily? In which relationships is it a struggle to show these qualities, even with gritted teeth? How can God’s love help us to grow in our capacity to love more naturally?
- Paul also says that love does not boast, and is not self-seeking. Have you ever wished that others would envy something about you or your life? Is it possible that one big reason we are tempted by boasting and self-seeking is a desire to produce envy in others?

FRIDAY Galatians 5:13-23

As we end our study of the seven deadly sins, we return to this great passage. Here Paul describes the vast spiritual freedom Christ offers each of us. We can live free of the deadly sins by finding our true selves, led by God’s Spirit, and bearing the Spirit’s fruit. “Against such things there is no law.”

- What have you learned during this series about yourself and your spiritual journey? What changes, if any, will you make in order to put your life more fully under the Holy Spirit’s direction? Which of the fruits of the Spirit do you most want God to grow in you during the rest of 2009?
- Like Jesus, Paul quotes Leviticus 19:18 (“Love your neighbor as yourself”) as summing up all of the law. How do the deadly sins keep you from that kind of love for your neighbor? How do the fruits of the Spirit create a way of life in which it is increasingly natural for you to love your neighbor?

SATURDAY

Personal:

“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long....Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Ps. 32:3, 5). Confess your struggles with envy to God. Need help treasuring who you are and the life you’ve been given? Talk with your pastor or a counselor.

Family Activity:

Read Psalm 23. Use the Internet, books and other resources to research shepherds and sheep. List what each is like, and discuss why David chose, in this psalm, to name the Lord his shepherd. As a “sheep”, what were David’s needs? When he wrote, “I shall not be in want,” what did he mean? As a family, create a list of your needs. Would any of them fit better in a list entitled “Wants?” Discuss the differences between David’s message and what today’s media and society say about needs and wants. How do you feel when friends have items on your “want” list? Are you able to look at the needs God meets for you and thank God for those? Pray, asking God for a spirit of gratitude and grace.

Prayer:

O God who gives us all we need and more, thank you for the blessings in my life. Forgive me for comparing the gifts you give me with those you give anyone else. Help me to love others with a love that delights in the good things in their lives, and bless them with my prayers. In Jesus name, Amen.