

Series: Flow

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“Living Beyond Greed”

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Good morning! When I was seven or eight years old, my dad took me on a special fishing trip. Now up until then I had been fishing with him in lots of different ways...deep sea fishing, surf fishing, a river, lake...but this one was special. My dad had been telling me about a river in Kern County up in the Tehachapi's for an awfully long time, and he was so excited to take me. We hiked half a mile in to the river.

One of the things that you have to know about my dad...and it's interesting, this morning it dawned on me when I got up to preach the first time, today in the nineteenth anniversary of his death...he was an incredibly larger than life person. When he walked into the room you knew it. He had an exuberant spirit and a look on his face of joy almost all the time, and I remember this particular fishing trip because it was my first memory as his daughter of the first time I ever saw his face go from exuberant to crestfallen.

We hiked in about a half a mile and turned the corner to this magnificent river and what he saw stopped him cold in his tracks. For about 30 seconds I watched his eyes scan back and forth, and he shook his head, and then he did one of those long inhale whistles. A few minutes later, one of the game wardens came by, and I listened to my dad and the game warden talk for about 30 minutes about what happened to that river. It was a mess. He said that there had been an influx of beavers that had started dams and a number of farmers who had done illegal irrigation diversions off the river; there was trash in the river. What didn't happen that day was any fishing because it was almost a creek, and there were no trout in it at all.

A few weeks ago, John started this series on *Flow* with the vision of what it means to live an abundant life...the life God promised us, to be truly free and happy and living in the flow of the Holy Spirit. Two weeks ago we started looking at what are the things that block the flow of the Holy Spirit in our lives...resentment, and anxiety. This week we're going to talk about greed, next week, superiority. Things kind of turned this week because of this. Resentment and anxiety are something that you wear on the outside. It's hard to be resentful or anxious and not have it come out in your speech. People know it over time.

The problem with greed and superiority (next week) is they get a little tricky and they kind of grow underground. None of us in this room this morning could disagree that there has been a climate of greed in our country recently that has certainly played a role in the economic meltdown, the near collapse of Wall Street, the bloated CEO compensation packages, all of which are teetering us towards what some people are calling an absolute global financial crisis. We live in a world now where millions seem like an insignificant amount because the "B" and the "T" have replaced the "M", and we are all painfully aware of the havoc that can be wreaked when greed goes unchecked...in other people...because certainly, you and I don't struggle with greed.

About a week ago John and I became aware of a young family up in our San Mateo campus who found themselves in a difficult situation both financially and with a relative who was very ill, and they needed help. So John and I prayed about it, and we put some money in an envelope and wrote a note, and last week I handed it to him. I told him it was coming, and he said, "I can't take this." And I said, "Dude, I'm doing a sermon on greed this week, I really need for you to take this money." And then he said to me, "But you don't struggle with greed."

Now I was raised a good girl by my mom who taught me when somebody gives you a compliment you say, "Thank you." And so what I wanted to say was, "Yes, that's true, I don't. But here please have the money anyway." But the truth is I do, and so do you, and the danger this morning is that we listen to these words for the next few minutes, and we think of other people instead of ourselves. And the important reason isn't because in the next few minutes we're going to come up with a behavioral modification program that will make us less greedy, because that's where religion has gone astray.

Religion is not a coat that we put on to cover up what's wrong with us; religion...which in Scripture is actually a lovely word...is more like a meal that we ingest that changes us from the inside out. God isn't just saying don't be greedy for the sake of not being greedy, He's saying there's an abundant life, and greed impedes the flow of that life in you. Greed is something that we all struggle with because from time-to-time we all have this overwhelming desire to have stuff that we think is going to make us happy when in reality it is going to end up both suffocating us and owning us. Not only trapping us but keeping us from experiencing the abundant life.

All of us are going to have, at one time or another, self-serving desires, mismanaged appetites, an excessive urge to possess something in order to bring immediate gratification, and for greed to take root in your life and in my life, I have to convince myself that I *need* this, I *deserve* it, and if I don't take control, I won't get it. All of those things take me and put me right in the center of my very, very small universe.

Now greed is not just a word, greed is actually a syndrome. It's a collection of circumstances that happen in our lives that lead us to greed. I want to look at that for a minute, and while I do I just want to take this moment to remind all of us that John Ortberg did not invent the flip chart, okay? I just want to say that sometimes when others of us preach like Kevin Kim and Scott Scruggs and Lindsay James, we get asked afterward, "Oh, you used the flip chart like John." I knew about these before I ever met John Ortberg. Okay, okay? So I just want to set the record straight on that. That has nothing to do with greed.

So greed isn't necessarily linear, but there is this cycle of circumstances, this syndrome that has to be in place for greed to take root, and one of the first things that is going to have to happen in my life if I'm going to move toward greed is I'm going to have to get involved in comparison. I'm going to have to take a long look at you and decide that I like your clothes better than I like mine, that you drive a nicer car, that I heard about your vacation that was a better place than mine, that your job is better, your spouse is better, your children are more well-behaved, and I have to get the scales out. I have to put myself on one side and you on the other, and I have to end up the poorer because of it. That will begin forcing me into this thing called greed.

Something else that has to happen in this syndrome is I have to have scarcity. Now here's what I think is important about this word. I think the adjective would be *perceived* scarcity. I have to believe that there's not enough to go around, and that if I don't get busy and get to work I'm going to lose out. I have to believe that God has a limited amount of blessings that He can pour out and you just got a little more than I did, so I'm not feeling very good about that.

In order to have greed take root in our lives, you have to throw in just a little bit of envy and a little bit of jealousy. I have to look at you and wish I had what you want even to the extent that I hope you have less in order for me to get more. For greed to take root, a couple of other things have to happen. There has to be a sense of urgency: I need this, and I need it now. I am not willing to wait for God's timing. I am not willing to wait for the journey God has to take me on to get it. I need it now. And always greed has a deceitful element to it, where I have to deceive and lie in order to get what I want, and what sits in the middle of all of this is some kind of hunger, some kind of appetite, for something that you and I have that results in greed.

So for the next few minutes I want to take us into Scripture and look at a couple of verses because the Bible has a lot to say about greed. Then I want to look at the different kinds of greed, and then I want to look at the way free from it. Let's take a look at what the Bible has to say about greed. In 2 Peter, chapter 2, Peter writes to the Church. There are people in your church that are not just greedy; they are really good at it. They have become what Peter would call "experts in greed," and in doing so they have actually wandered away from their faith.

The next verse I want to look at is in James chapter 5, and this one hits a little more close to home where James says there are people in the Church who have lived their lives by choice, "*...in luxury and self-indulgence.*" Where the sheet thread count is important and the brand on the car and the label on the clothes are really important, and their lives are defined not by giving but by consumption for themselves. Jeremiah, chapter 6, the prophet says whether you're least or the greatest in society it doesn't matter, all struggle with greed for gain.

Then in Matthew chapter 23, Jesus saves some of His most vitriolic words for the Pharisees, nothing new there, He does that often. He gets the angriest at the religious leaders, but this passage is in particularly angry, and you ought to see the verses right in front of this and right after this. He is cranked up and mad. Not only does He call them hypocrites, He says, "In the name of religion you walk around looking great on the outside, but I know that on the inside you're lives are primarily about greed and self-indulgence," and He is not happy with that.

Then finally, in Luke chapter 12, Jesus says not only should we guard against greed, He says, be warned there are all *kinds* of greed. It's not as simple as just financial greed. Then He goes on to remind us that your life is not about the abundance of your possessions. Again, Jesus is talking about not following rules to have a narrow life and be miserable, but to get free from the grip that possessions have on our lives. So let's take seriously for a moment Jesus saying that there are all kinds of greed, and let's look at four different kinds of greed where maybe you will see yourself this morning as we go through them.

The first is the most obvious. The Bible talks frequently about financial greed, about the need and the desire not only to have an abundance of possessions but to consume money. In financial greed, there's one passage in particular that I think really stands out in Luke chapter 16 where Jesus tells a story about a man who has had a really good year. His ship has come in, his stocks are up, and he has gotten more and more and more, and the barns that he has created to collect the crops won't hold the abundance of what he has this year. And his solution rather than to give is to say, "I'm going to tear those barns down and build bigger storages."

Now listen, this is important...in financial greed, we make the mistake of becoming cul-de-sacs rather than conduits for the generosity of God in our lives. We become dead end streets and barns with no doors

that open to anybody but ourselves when we keep collecting more and more and more. It's easy in this area of the world to look around and find 25 people who have more than you and pat yourself on the back and think you don't do this. And there's a whole other world that if we compared ourselves to we would see how quickly we become cul-de-sacs and dead ends for financial greed.

The second kind of greed that the Bible talks about in a number of different places is sexual greed. The mismanaged appetite for this amazing gift God has given two people who have promised in the context of life together with no one else, this form of intimacy deeper than any other kind of intimacy that's reserved for that relationship to be misused and mismanaged and to be grabbed after in a gluttonous way to satisfy our own desires. Inside marriage, outside marriage, it can be in the form of pornography, it can be in the form of an actually physical sexual relationship with somebody inappropriately who is not your spouse. It can be an emotional entanglement that has a sexual undertone, but you believe because nothing physical has happened that you're patting yourself on the back once again. And God says it's all greed. It's all striving to get something from another person that God says is not appropriate.

In 2 Samuel, chapter 11, we hear the story of David who struggled with this. The story tells us that one night David got up, maybe he could not sleep...got up from his bed and began to walk on the roof of the palace. And while he did he noticed a woman who was beautiful, bathing in her home. And her name was Bathsheba. The story says that David saw her and that she was beautiful and that he lusted after her, and that he sent for her and brought her to him. He had an inappropriate sexual relationship with her that ended up getting her pregnant.

In his deceit to cover it up, he pulled her husband back from his armed forces and brought him home in the hopes that he would sleep with his wife and that David could pass the child off as his. But his man had more integrity in him than David did in the moment, and he wouldn't do it in a solidarity with his troops that were still fighting the battle, and in desperation David sent him back to the war with direction to the generals that when he was on the front line, remove the troops from him so that he will be killed. There was a covering up, somewhat inevitable with this sexual greed that was happening.

I think the saddest part about this story is if you go back just a little ways you realize that God had been so good to David. God had given him not only everything he wanted, but way more than that. But it wasn't enough. He had been an obscure shepherd boy that nobody paid any attention to, but God saw his heart and that it was good, and he said, "Because of your heart, David, I want to make you king over my people." And God gave him a family and a palace and armies that were victorious over the enemies, and still in his greed, David reached out to take what wasn't his.

There's a third kind of greed that is around the word "power." In Matthew, chapter 2, there's a great story of King Herod who struggled in his greed for power. He was the Roman ruler over the jurisdiction of the country of Israel, so he was both a Roman ruler but also the perceived king of the Jews, when he got word that a child had been born, a young boy names Jesus. And Jesus' name was said in the same sentence with the phrase King of the Jews, and this disturbed Herod greatly. His power was threatened, and in the threatening of his power he began to do everything he could in his own power with urgency and envy and jealousy to go after and find this baby, and when he couldn't do it, when he realized that he had been outwitted, in his anger he said, "Then let me give you a proclamation in this country: Every male child two years and under...kill them." There are historical records outside of Scripture that talk about the death of the children during the reign of Herod.

Now let's not get too comfortable here because it is easy to see a king that has power and dismiss ourselves from the struggle of greed in the context of power. But for every one of us that has wanted more attention than we deserve, that has talked too much and boasted in ways that aren't based in reality, and wanted people to know how important we are, we too struggle with the greed of power. For many of you that are in the business world this is a huge issue as a Christ follower to understand how to use the power that God has given you in ways that are appropriate and honor other people instead of lording it over others.

Then the fourth kind of greed that Scripture returns to over and over again may surprise you initially when you hear it, but after you think about it probably won't, and that is spiritual greed. There is a way in which even in our relationship with God we can get greedy. There's an example in Acts, chapter 8, about a man called Simon who was a sorcerer who boasted that he was a great person and all the people gave him attention and said he has power that is from God, but that wasn't true.

Then Simon's life intersects with the life of the apostles who had been with Jesus, whose power came from the Holy Spirit, and when Simon saw that the works that they did were truly from God, he opened his wallet and took out money and said, "I will pay you to give me the ability that you have so that everybody will think that my power also comes from the Holy Spirit." And in the Church, our misuse of the language..."God told me," "I had a vision." Again, let me be careful, I believe those things can happen, but we have to be very careful how we use that language in a way to spiritually be greedy so that other people put us up on a pedestal.

We can also be spiritually greedy just like the children of Israel who wanted one mountain top experience after the other. When we've had an encounter with God in a profound way, it can turn to spiritual greed when we insist that every day be better and better than the last one. When our need to connect to God on that mountain top makes us not live well in the ordinary days when we struggle like everyone does not knowing whether God is close or not.

So every one of us struggles with greed and not only is greed harmful, it interrupts this flow that we are desperate for in our lives. So for the last few minutes I'd like to take a look at four words that I think the Bible brings up over and over again that if we ponder them, if we think about them, if we meditate on them and try to live out of them, we will grow in our ability to be free of greed. If at the center of the word 'greed,' whether it's financial or sexual or spiritual or whatever is the word 'more.' What are the words, what are the thoughts from God that can get us away from that need to want more?

The first is this word is the word 'enough.' I wonder for all of us in this room, myself included, how often we think deeply about the goodness of the word 'enough.' Because here is this truth, there may be a very, very, very rare exception in this room, but I would say most of us, we have enough. I was at the same conference that Chris James mentioned earlier this week with Dallas Willard, and John asked him the question, "When you wake up in the morning, how do you connect to God?" And Dallas said one of the things that he does sometimes is recite the twenty-third Psalm aloud to himself. He said, "Sometimes I don't even make it through the whole twenty-third Psalm. I only get to a certain passage that grabs my soul, and I live with that for the rest of the day."

Dallas said that when he was a young boy growing up in the South in the Arkansas area, he was for a while a shepherd, a sheep herder. He said there are only two times when sheep will lie down in green pastures...when they know they are safe and when they have had enough to eat. The Lord is my

Shepherd; He makes me to lie down in green pastures. Why? Because you are safe and because you have enough.

In Exodus chapter 16, there is the story of the children of Israel who had been for hundreds of years captive and enslaved in Egypt and they hated it, and they complained about getting out. So God sent Moses and they got out, and as soon as they got out, they started remembering all of the great restaurants back in Egypt and saying we want to go back to where there were leeks and onions. So God in His goodness in the desert where they were going to spend 40 years before they entered the Promised Land, gave them water and quail and then in the morning when the dew came, a thin little white substance that formed over the dew that was bread-like called manna. Actually the Hebrew word for manna means "what is this stuff?" We've never seen it before. There is much to learn about the gift of manna when it comes to the word 'enough.'

In Exodus, chapter 16, God says, "Here are your instructions in the morning when you're hungry: Go out and gather what you need, but don't gather enough for tomorrow. Gather just enough for today, because while you're in the desert for the next 40 years I want to teach you about the nature of need. God says that I will provide for you every morning and that I am enough." The truth about the bread and the manna in Exodus finds its way into the Lord's Prayer that we just prayed... "Give us this day our daily bread." We have enough.

The second word that helps us overcome greed in our lives is the word 'content.' I wonder when is the last time you have either asked yourself how content you are or you have felt deeply content mostly because of who God is in your life? Content is a powerful word and Paul writes in 1 Timothy, chapter 6, to a young boy named Timothy: you need to know from the time you are a young man that when you put godliness together with contentment, you have walked far down the road of following God. He reminds Timothy that the truth is when you were born you had nothing, that will be true of you when you die so why in the world would you spend your time in between trying to accumulate things? Be free and be content.

Philippians 4 is a very well known passage that Paul writes to the church in Philippi and he says, "Listen, I have learned to be content. No matter what my external circumstances are if I'm in need or if I have a lot it doesn't matter. I've learned to be content. Whatever the situation, if I find myself hungry or full, if I have plenty or want, there is a bedrock identity inside of me that is unshakable, and it is God. God causes me to be content."

Then in Hebrews chapter 13, the author of Hebrews says, "***Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have.***" Then what I love is the rest of this verse, not for the sake of not being greedy, but because you have a promise that God, the giver of all good things, has said to you, "I won't ever leave you alone and I won't ever forsake you." So use that as the reason why you are free of money and the love of it.

A couple of weeks ago my son had been home for the Christmas break and was getting ready to go back down to Santa Barbara to college, and he was getting ready to leave on a Friday, John was out of town, the girls were busy, and I said, "Hey, I have an idea. What if instead of leaving on Friday to go back to school you leave on Thursday, I go with you, we'll drive separate because I have to come back up here, and we go down to Big Sur and we spend the night in Deetjens." Which is this ramshackly little place that is quite inexpensive to stay in, you have to share a bathroom with somebody down the hall, but it's just a great place. And Johnny said, "That's a great idea. I have a better idea let's leave a little early on

Thursday and let's go to Santa Cruz first so I can surf." And since life is all about him at 20 and surfing I said, "Okay, sure."

So we drive down to Santa Cruz to Seymour Lane right where the little surfer museum is, and I sat on the bench and watched my son surf for a few minutes, and then I took a long run down the boardwalk up along the coast, he and I came back, and I got in my car, sweaty in my sweat pants and my hair in a pony tail. I was a mess and I was glad nobody else was in the car with me because it did not smell pretty in there. Johnny got in his car and before we got on Highway 1 to go down to Nepenthe for dinner and check in at Deetjens, we stopped at a gas station so he could fill his car with gas, and I didn't need gas so I pulled my car a few feet away and rolled my window down.

It was a really rare January kind of balmy night right before dusk where the sky was orange and red but fading into dark blue, and it was silhouetting the palm trees, and I was leaning out the window every once in a while yelling something to Johnny and I asked myself the question, "How's your soul? Are you content?" And the answer was a resounding "yes." In that moment doing absolutely nothing to change the world, kind of a mess, on my way to Big Sur with my son, I was deeply content.

Now a few minutes later I got behind a slow driver on Highway 1 that was really annoying and kind of went out the window, but I'm not of the belief that spirituality and following God is 24/7 all the time. Those 30 seconds of contentment were a seed and a gift, and a sign marker that I was going in the right direction and a bedrock to which I could return when I wasn't content to remind me of the power of being content.

The third word, and this word I believe has power along the lines of nuclear power in getting us free of greed is the word 'grateful.' Here's the trick and the secret to the word 'grateful,' when you are grateful you have to have a person attached to it. You don't write thank-you notes and put them in the mail with no address on them. When you say thank you about something you say it to someone, and gratitude implies the existence of a good God to which I am grateful, and unleashing the power of gratitude in our lives as Christ's followers to a God who not only created us and created a world of breathtaking beauty, He also said when He saw that we were separated from Him because of our sin, He said, "I will give up what is most precious to Me in the form of My Son to get you back with Me." And if that doesn't incur gratitude in you I'm not sure what will.

Hebrews...the author of Hebrews...in chapter 12 is one of my favorite verses, *"So let us be grateful, let us be thankful and when we do so let us realize that we are worshipping God."* You and I are misinformed when we think when we come in here on Sunday mornings that when we sing we worship. That is only one form of worship, and God is saying to us, "Every time a grateful word escapes your lips or forms in your head, you are worshipping God, and you are freeing yourself up from the insatiable desire for more."

Then the last word, which I think builds on these three that we have already seen, is when we are truly free of greed, we become a staggeringly generous people, both as individuals in our own lives and as a collective community and a church. In 2 Corinthians, chapter 9, in verse 11, Paul writes, here's what will happen in your lives, *"You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion."* You are not blessed or given things in order to be a cul-de-sac, but to be a conduit.

In 1 Timothy, chapter 6, again Paul is writing to a very young person to get it right from the beginning, tell them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and to be willing to share. Why? So that you

can live life in the flow. So that the abundant life will be yours, so that life that is truly life is what you are free to live. In 1 Peter, chapter 5, Peter writes, "Don't be greedy for money, but serve. And don't just serve; get it right with eager anticipation desire to serve as a way to be free from greed."

In the last service a gentleman came up to be after the sermon and said that he had recently been informed of two single moms down in our Mountain View campuses that are in dire straights that know each other, but both find themselves financially in horrific situations with small children. This man found out about it and put together two huge baskets for each of these single moms that included gift certificates and cash and all kinds of amazing things to help. When he took the first basket to the first woman, when he got done handing it to her he said to her, "I am going over to Sally's house now." (That's not her real name.) And she said, "Oh, when you handed me this basket I'd been thinking the whole time you had been talking to me how I need to split this with Sally." Somebody in such dire needs becomes the recipient of such amazing generosity and than her first thoughts are not even "thanks be to God", but "how will I share this with someone else who is in my same situation?"

Change in our lives as individuals comes both incrementally and exponentially, both in small, little ways in which we're faithful to get away from greed and give and then in life-defining moments of huge amounts of promiscuous, staggering giving. It's true in our individual lives, and it's true in our churches. I'll tell you the truth; I am so not interested in being part of a church that is a sweet, soft presence in the community. I am interested in being part of a church that is a seismic epicenter for the goodness of God to get poured out in this world. I'm interested in being a church that doesn't just do random acts of kindness but that says let's take a look at systemic endemic poverty in the world, and let's be a force in fixing it.

I spoke with Mark Swarner, our pastor of missions, a couple of weeks ago and he has a tiny, little seed idea. Somebody else in the congregation told him do you know the climate of China right now? Factories are closing down, we could purchase at very low cost factories. We could get Christians to work in there. We could re-invigorate the economy. We could spread the gospel. Will it happen? I don't know. I'm not that smart, but some of you here are, and if you can solve that problem, take it to the bank. I will be one of the first people in line over and above my tithe to write a check for that. I want to give to ways in which the world is going to take notice of this in this place because this church on this peninsula has been blessed financially in ways that most churches can't even dream of.

There is, in East Palo Alto, no major grocery store. I think that's so not okay. I don't know how we're going to solve it, but I do know that when God's people take seriously the outpouring of generosity based on the enough that God has given them, these kinds of things will happen. Two more passages in Malachi chapter 3, the prophet says...the only place in Scripture where we are invited to test God...you have forgotten the tithe, you have forgotten the 10% that God says is a base line starting point. The prophet says, "I challenge you to test God in this. You start there and you see if God doesn't open the flood gates of heaven, not as a way to pay you back but as a way to show you this is God's reality when you give, this is what God unleashes in the world."

I was raised by a grandmother from the time I was five years old, unapologetically I will stand up here and tell you the tithe is something I take very seriously and it is a starting place for me. I want to be part of a church that starts there and gives more. Then finally in 2 Samuel chapter 24, David is given something so that he can make a sacrifice to God and he won't take it and his words are this: ***"I refuse to sacrifice to God that which costs me nothing."*** Greed will stem the flow of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

When I was 12 years old, I hiked that half mile again back in the Techachapi's with my dad, and what a day we had! We caught our limit of trout that day. The river had been restored. We ran into another game warden who told us about the beaver relocation program...two thumbs up on that one...the fines that some of the farmers got and the irrigation diversions that were restored, the trash clean up that happened, the river was magnificent.

My dad caught a 28-inch German Brown that day, which is a native not a stocked fish. It is the only fish in my memory as a girl growing up that he didn't eat or catch and release, but he stuffed and mounted on the wall. Every Christmas I would take it down when he wasn't looking and write "to Aunt Mary from Al" and give it, and then he would get mad and then put it back up on the wall. But the river was restored. And the river ran through the valley and there was life in it.

May that be true of me. May it be true of you. May it be true of us. Will you pray with me? God, be our vision. Don't even let our vision of the church be big enough, but may our vision always be of Your goodness, and may our giving and our obedience flow out of the centrality of Your good nature. May this church be that kind of place. May we act on this today, and Monday at work, and Tuesday in the grocery store, and Wednesday as we drive. May You teach us the taste of freedom that comes when we get away from greed.