

Affluenza

The Rev. Dr. Peter
G. James

Genesis 27:30-41

Sermon Series:
Seven Greatest
Virtues and Vices:
Gluttony and
Temperance

*Affluenza
attempts to
meet non-
material
needs with
material
goods.*

There is a highly contagious and potentially lethal epidemic sweeping our land. Its symptoms include compulsive shopping, high debt, overwork, an inability to delay gratification and an exaggerated sense of entitlement.

This disease has a name—affluenza; a word my spell check doesn't recognize. Affluenza is the cross between the words influenza (a highly contagious disease) and affluence (a great deal of money). Put them together and you have a useful word to describe our conspicuous over-consumption.

If you doubt what I'm saying, consider that more Americans will visit shopping malls today than will attend church. Shopping has become therapeutic in our day. Or consider that today's typical garage exceeds the size of a 1950s starter home. The size of the average American home has more than doubled since the '50s. People are tearing down smaller homes in our region to build bigger ones. Despite our monstrous homes, storage businesses are boom-ing.

John De Graaf has written a whimsical yet altogether serious book on the subject that has

been made into a successful PBS special. De Graaf describes affluenza as “a painful, contagious, socially transmittable condition of overwork, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.”

It's no wonder we are feeling bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled. Affluenza attempts to meet non-material needs with material goods.

I came across a YouTube video that I recommend you watch sometime: “Teenage Affluenza is Spreading Fast.” This video, produced by World Vision and released in Australia, has relevance for new generations in our country.

Affluenza is the disease of greed. Our focus this past summer and early fall has been on the Seven Deadly Sins. Greed certainly qualifies as a lethal sin.

Greed blows a hole in the ben Isaac family. Isaac is the only child of father Abraham. Isaac marries Rebekah. They are unable to conceive, so they pray for a son. Their prayers are answered in dramatic fashion. Rebekah learns that she is carrying twins in her womb. Their uterine jostling prefigures a cosmic struggle to come between two sons and even-

***... Jacob is a
born grabber.***

tually two nations for supremacy.

Esau is born first and is ruddy in appearance. Jacob is born moments later, grabbing the heel of his older brother. That's what Jacob's name means—"the heel grabber." From the very outset, Jacob is a born grabber.

Esau is the outdoor type, a proficient hunter like his father. Jacob is more domesticated, something of a momma's boy, you might say. One of the subplots in our story is the chaos that ensues when parents play favorites.

One day, Esau returns from hunting empty-handed. Jacob, true to form, is cooking stew over an open fire. Esau is famished, so he asks his brother for a meal. Jacob, ever the grabber, agrees to share his stew provided that Esau will relinquish his birthright. Esau agrees to the preposterous trade, a bowl of pottage in exchange for a birthright.

Now fast forward with me to Genesis 27. Isaac is now old and blind. Knowing his days are numbered, he calls Esau to fetch some game so he can pronounce the final blessing. This blessing is his formal act of bestowing on Esau his rights as the principal heir. Biblical law specified a double portion of the estate to the eldest son to keep the family farm intact (Deuteronomy 21:17). Isaac is either totally oblivious to Jacob's earlier hustling of Esau

for his birthright or has forgotten all about it.

Rebekah overhears Isaac's promise to bless Esau and springs into action. She dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes to simulate his physical features and imitate Esau's culinary skills to finagle the blessing for her younger son. Jacob eagerly participates in the deception, since he has only half of what he needs. He has his brother's birthright; he still needs his father's blessing.

Jacob shows up dressed like Esau, complete with his father's favorite meal. Isaac registers surprise that his son is back so soon. Here, our narrative reaches low ebb. Jacob has the audacity to claim that God has granted him success (27:20). Despite his misgivings, Isaac proceeds to bestow the blessing.

Jacob departs with the blessing and Esau enters. The anguish over Jacob's deception is almost palpable in the exchange between Isaac and Esau. Why doesn't Isaac just nullify the blessing and give it to Esau. It doesn't work that way. In those days your word is law. The blessing is irrevocable.

Jacob gets what he wants. He grabs his brother's birthright and hustles his father's blessing. But he pays a heavy price. Jacob must now flee for his life. He will never see his parents again. His greedy scheme tears the family apart.

I'm not satisfied with what I have. I want what you have.

Years later, the brothers reconcile only after Jacob wrestles with God and emerges with a dislocated hip and a new destiny.

Greed is deadly. It belongs among the Seven Deadly Sins. Greed is, by all accounts, a killer sin.

Greed always wants more. It doesn't recognize when enough is enough. Jacob isn't satisfied with being the number two son. He has to be number one. I'm not satisfied with what I have. I want what you have.

Money becomes something of a black hole. The more we have, the more we want. Someone asked John D. Rockefeller, one of America's richest, "How much is enough?" Rockefeller quipped, "Just a little bit more."

Money clouds our vision. It gives exaggerated importance to the value of money. Jesus warned his followers, "Life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions" (Luke 12:15). Apparently, some of us didn't get that memo!

I find it curious that on the New York Times bestseller list for paperback nonfiction, four of the top ten books are specifically Christian in content. One of them is written by the youngest pastor of an American mega-church. David Platt was all of 26 when he wrote the book *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*. Platt chronicles his growing uneasiness with his role as pastor of a Birmingham,

Alabama mega-church. These multimillion dollar worship palaces, in Platt's words, have become like big corporations, competing for market share by offering social centers, child-care programs, first class entertainment and comfortable, consumer Christianity. Jesus is portrayed in such settings as something of a congenial suburban dude.

Columnist David Brooks notes that Platt not only takes aim on mega-churches but takes aim on the American dream itself. When Europeans first settled in America, they recognized its natural bounty and came to two conclusions: first, that God's plan for humanity could be realized here and that second, they could get really rich helping God build His kingdom here. This has become the central tension in American life: to build God's kingdom in this world as well as prepare for the next. This may explain why America is simultaneously religious and materialistic. Platt argues in his book that "The American Dream differs radically from the call of Jesus and the essence of the gospel."

As his book title suggests, Platt arrives at some radical suggestions to remedy this disparity. His book calls upon Christians to follow Jesus and surrender our allegiance to the American Dream.

Our Christian forebears not only railed against these Seven Deadly Sins, they counter-

We don't own anything. Everything we have is on loan from God.

balanced them with seven lively virtues. Greed is offset by generosity. Biblical generosity centers on the premise that God is exceedingly generous. The name for God's generosity is grace. Grace is God's unmerited favor. We do not deserve or earn God's favor. Grace comes to us as sheer gift.

Our prime motive for generosity is not duty or obligation, it is grace. We seek to live grace-filled. Our aim is not to be tight-fisted but to practice open-handed generosity.

We offer a five-week Faith and Finances class at this church. You can access the Faith and Finances section of our website to learn more. People tend to shy away from money management classes at church. We surmise it's designed for people in financial distress or imagine our real motive is somehow to extract money from you by any means possible.

Our goal is something different. We believe our money management and budgeting reflect (or fail to reflect) what we value and consider important. We seek to be good stewards with the resources God has entrusted to us. We aspire, as we teach in this class, to be Diligent Earners, Cautious Debtors, Prudent Consumers, Wise Savers and Generous Givers. We have butchered this word stewardship in the church. We are so conditioned whenever we hear this word to think of fall finan-

cial drives. The Biblical perspective is far more comprehensive. Scripture teaches that we are stewards of all God's resources. We don't own anything. Everything we have is on loan from God.

John Ortberg, in his book *It All Goes Back in the Box*, writes about learning to play Monopoly with his grandmother. John's grandmother was a ruthless Monopoly player. She understood the object of the game. She bought everything she landed on. Even when she could not afford more acquisitions, she mortgaged to the max to acquire more.

John discovered that the way to win at Monopoly is to make a total commitment to acquisition. Money and possessions are the way to keep score. John eventually beat his grandmother at Monopoly. He remembers the day it happened. His grandmother landed on Marvin Gardens which John owned; whereupon his grandmother handed over her last dollar and conceded defeat.

Then John learned a valuable lesson. After acquiring all those houses and hotels, railroads and utility companies and the game was over, it all went back in the box. None of it ultimately belonged to him. All his houses and cars, titles and positions, earned income and accumulated assets went back in the box.

We don't own anything. In the end, it all goes back in the box.