

Neighbor-love ... a Biblical precept that defies greed



Jim Childs

If you listen to [Jim Childs](#), you realize that greed is like a chameleon.

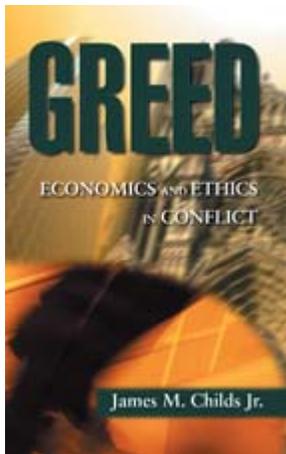
Yes, it is one of the Seven Deadly Sins – so egregiously insidious that they merit capital letters – memorized by every Roman Catholic schoolchild. But it changes its shape, adapting to the worst about the world and about those of us who live here.

“It is as old as the hills, as the world,” says Childs during a telephone interview from his new perch as a visiting ethicist at Gettysburg Theological Seminary. Childs is a senior research professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. “It just takes on new expressions.”

He’s talking, of course, about the commodification of life’s most basic human services. About corporate downsizing in the face of escalating executive compensation and shareholder returns. About the cost of healthcare and the rising numbers of people who cannot afford the most basic treatment. About disparities in the global economic structure where an often ruthless form of capitalism functions unrivaled, a reality that mires big chunks of the world in poverty and hunger – and the ever growing gulf between the very rich and the poor here in the United States.

In a culture like ours, where individualism and freedom are valued over equality, Childs argues that it is still possible to see the true colors of greed – and to work for justice and the common good despite ourselves, because, “for God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19: 25-26).

How? An ethic of neighbor-love, which lies at the core of Jesus’ teaching.



“We have to remember that justice moves up the ladder. We make a little difference in our own lives in an economic system that is overwhelmingly complex – and our efforts are a spit in the ocean. So, it is not as individual Christians ... or as members of local congregations (that are the sole basis for our identities).

“But we’re a global community. We don’t exist for our own aggrandizement, but rather for the needs of others. There are countless Christian communities all over the globe. And every now and then, the kingdom of God peeks into history,” says Childs, for whom, neighbor is a word with far-reaching implications.

Neglect of the common good is the outcome of “self-centered personal expression,” Childs writes in his book, *Greed: Economics and Ethics in Conflict*, published by the Augsburg Fortress Press in 2000. With cultural support of such self-centeredness, greed enables serious inequities that have nothing to do with choice or chance, but are, instead, built into the global economic structure – so

much so that greed is accepted as normal practice.

“Certain features of our cultural outlook, nurtured by key assumptions of our regnant economic philosophy, blind us to their own influence on our lives, much in the way certain diseases of the mind prevent us from realizing that we have them,” Childs writes, noting that two accepted tendencies cultivate this behavior.

Those tendencies are: 1) prioritizing the freedom of the individual ahead of the equality of the many and 2) a conviction rooted in the success of modern capitalism that wealth is virtually always capable of expansion, can always be turned into *more*.

In contrast, there is the Biblical model, where sharing and mutual concern is the norm of Christian life.

Jesus’ teaching about the kind of love that equalizes neighbors and ourselves conveys the intimate relatedness of our human existence and the necessity of caring and sharing as a Christian way of being in the world. Formed by love ourselves to live a Christian life and nurtured by the Holy Spirit, we’re called then, according to Childs, to be informed by love as we make ethical decisions.

Christians, he says, must keep the values of caring and sharing alive in the public consciousness, so therefore, must keep advocating and witnessing beyond the walls of congregations – else how will others experience the virtue of practicing and promoting love in daily life?

“The virtues of generosity, openness to one’s neighbor, compassionate justice and solidarity with those in need combine forces to keep people together when the power of greed and the influence of consumerism threaten separation,” Childs writes.

“We Christians are realists and idealists at the same time,” Childs says, explaining that the work before such communities of caring is enormous – but not without some visible outcomes.

For instance, Childs says that some businesses practice a form of stakeholder capitalism, which means that, communitarian values are always brought to the table. Businesses operate with the livelihoods of their communities, the health and safety of employees and customers as a core value and allow, as a matter of justice, those who are impacted by decisions to have a say in the processes that impact their lives.

Although only a few businesses operate within this model, Childs contends that, it is even less apparent in the international sphere. Imagine what it might be like if corporate contracts with foreign entities and trade agreements with other nations had the best interest of the partner at heart?

It is easy to feel overwhelmed when Christians analyze the world according to ethical principles culled by the tradition for centuries. “We have to remind ourselves that you cast your bread upon

the waters ... and the word will not return empty," Childs says. "In a sense, it is not all up to us.

"We do need to recognize that the kingdom of God is God's kingdom. And it is God who will bring it in. But we can run ahead to meet it. We can bear witness to what it is about ... and that is where faith and hope kick in."