

GREED: CANCER OF THE SOUL

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.
(Eccl 2:10)

Greed is a survival reflex resulting from with the sin of Adam and Eve. Cast out from the benefits and security of Eden, greed is rooted in self-preservation and fear. It arises from the heart that aspires to be “like God” (Gen 3:15). It knows no limits. It is self-satisfying and self-deifying. It inspires theft, envy, and jealousy. It motivates hoarding and stinginess. It undermines community and caring. Greed is rapacious.

Greed is the perversion of the consumption necessary for life to the point of obsession. Greed motivates idolatrous ambition, the desire for higher and higher status. It incites lust, gluttony, and hedonism. It drives the individual to heinous deeds and words of envy and jealousy. It inspires both the individual and community to “make a name” for itself through conquest and imperialism, like Babel (Gen 11:4). It legitimates lust for resources of all kinds -- human and natural -- for the certainty of security and glory.

Phyllis A. Tickle comments, “Greed is the most social and by extension the most political of the sins.” She describes the anatomy of greed in this manner:

From covetousness proceeds wrath; from covetousness flows lust, and it is from covetousness that loss of judgment, deception, pride, arrogance, and malice, as also vindictiveness, shamelessness, loss of prosperity, loss of virtue, anxiety, and infamy spring, miserliness, cupidity, desire for every kind of improper act, pride of birth, pride of learning, pride of beauty, pride of wealth, pitilessness for all creatures, malevolence towards all, mistrust in respect of all, insincerity towards all, appropriation of other people's wealth, ravishment of other people's wives, harshness of speech, anxiety, propensity to speak ill of others...all these proceed from covetousness.

Covetousness is also the source of “all kinds of evil” resulting from the “love of money” (1 Tim 6:10). Greed violates the Ten Commandments, especially, false witness (Dt 5:10), theft (v. 19), adultery (v. 18), murder (v. 17), and illicit desire (v. 21). “Greed causes envy which in turn causes hate that leads to war...Since there is no limit to the objects of greed, envy is never sated, but is self-gratifying” (*Encyclopedia Judaica*).

The evil of greed is expressed in the idiom of the “evil eye” in the Old Testament. The “eyes of man” are insatiable and “never satisfied” (Pr 27:20; cf. Eccl 1:8). The “evil eye” strives to avoid the economic impact of the Seventh-Year Sabbath. The evil eye is “hardhearted” and “tightfisted” (Dt 15:7). It is not “generous” and it is “grudging” to others (15:10; 28:54, 46). The “evil-eyed” person is “stingy,” views everything as a commodity, and measures every aspect of life on a cost effective basis (Pr 23:6-7). An evil-eyed person is often “eager to get rich” (Pr 28:22) and “his eyes were not content with his wealth” (Eccl 4:8). On the other hand, the one who has a “good eye” is

“generous” or “openhanded” because “he shares his food with the poor” (Pr 22:9; Dt 15:8, 11).

The insatiable nature of greed is evidenced, further, in the Old Testament censure of envy (Job 5:2; Pr 3:31; 23:17; 24:1, 19). The envious heart is never content or at rest with the prosperity of others. It feels jealous and threatened (Gen 26:12-15). It is penny-pinching and oblivious to the needy. Psalm 37 depicts the “evil-eyed”/envious persons as those who “bring down the poor and needy” (v. 14), who are “wealthy” (v. 16). For these reasons the righteous should never be envious of “evil men...who do wrong” (Ps 37:1) or of “the prosperity of the wicked” (Ps 73:3).

In the New Testament Jesus wrote: “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Lk 12:15). He equated greed with self-indulgence (Mt 23:25) and wickedness (Lk 11:39). Quoting Jeremiah 7:1 and 11, he declared about the temple: “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers” (Mt 21:13). Paul wrote that greed is “what is earthly” in us and a form of idolatry (Col 3:5).

In summary, for the finite and fallen creature who longs to “play god” greed is a necessary, though futile, virtue. As Gordon Gekko, the unscrupulous banker in the original “Wall Street” movie, confidently proclaimed: “Greed is good.” Covetousness is a Machiavellian-like utility in a world conditioned by sin. It grants power crucial in the unending quest to secure the future and to “make a name” for oneself and for one's society.

Greed, however, has a built-in self-contradicting or reversal principle. Like a crab in a crab bucket, none can get out, because when one lifts himself up, the others pull him back down.

Do you suffer from this cancer of the soul, greed?

Is your heart dominated by acquisitiveness nurtured by consumerism?

Do you struggle with envy or pride of possessions or accomplishment?

Do you “play god” to guarantee a comfortable future?

Do you strive “to make a name” for yourself in order to achieve a positive self image or legacy?