



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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GREED

The name of greed is seldom heard among us. Yet the vice is far from absent. We like to think that we are far beyond such a basic error, but it is not so. Many Christians are afflicted with it to some extent. But we do not always recognize it for what it is. We are used to thinking that our concern is for justice when in fact we are being greedy.

Greed comes out most clearly in situations of unearned wealth. Consider a situation of a coming inheritance. The two daughters are concerned about the division of the property. They say that their concern is not for themselves but for their children. The one with three children thinks that more should pass their way, since the other has only two. Then the one of the sisters cared for their father in his later days: surely she deserves something for that. She also is living in the family house, so presumably she should get that. And so it goes, each trying to figure out how to satisfy all the claims. Within those terms, it is an impossible task.

The details may vary, but the underlying motives are the same. Each party argues his case on the basis of what is justly due him. Sometimes (as in the case of the children), he argues not for his own gain but for his children's. Disputes arise because different people have different views of what is just. Such disputes are virtually inevitable when there is some property which is not easily divisible such as an art collection, a house or a piece of land.

We all would be happy to have nice things, and few of us are inclined to refuse an inheritance. This does not make us all greedy. Greedy desires are those which demand satisfaction as a matter of right. Non-greedy desires do not.

create much of a stir if things don't happen to work out. They are just as happy (almost) that someone else can benefit from the unexpected and unearned blessing. The way to discern whether your desires are greedy is to ask how you would feel if you didn't get what you want. Would you be all upset and resentful? Would you go off and pout? Would you get angry and indignant? If you would, you have a problem of greed.

Greed takes other forms besides inheritance battles. There are those who cheat on their taxes -- in the case of practicing Christians, it is not usually large scale cheating, for fear we might get caught. But a little fudging here and there may sneak in. After all, the government has all that money anyway ... Then there are those who are preoccupied with the division of the check after dinner in a restaurant. And if after everyone contributes what he thinks he should and there is a shortfall, they are quick to get upset, even if they are not the ones that kick in the extra.

The root of greed can be seen in the way everyone looks at the situation. All greedy people fall into the pit of seeing the situation in terms of what they can get out of it. Usually they put it in terms of justice, but that is but a cloak for greed. In the case of the inheritance, all of the wealth in question is unearned. It doesn't belong to any of them by right. It was surely the father's to do with as he wished, for he was the one who earned it all in the first place. But they see that (by right) it is as much theirs as anyone else's, and that is what leads to all the problems. Conceived in terms of right, it is impossible to break the bonds of greed.

Christian life generally cannot be based merely on earthly justice. Without Divine justice -- which is God's righteousness -- and Divine love, Christian life cannot exist. The mere quest for earthly justice does not necessarily lead to God (it does not even need a God), nor is it true to the whole of man's nature. It was the Pharisees' error to think that only earthly righteousness mattered. Jesus has told us that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. It must be the righteousness that God gives us, a righteousness based on Christ's example and His teaching that we must die in order to live. Jesus refused to have his teaching degraded into a teaching of mere earthly justice. Thus (for example) he refused to judge between the man and his brother over their inheritance. Christian life is to be based not on the pursuit of earthly justice but on sacrificial love.

Most manifestations of greed involve some confusion with the justice (understood in purely earthly terms) of the situation. In the case of the inheritance, it is easy wealth on which the heir has no particular claim, but on which no one else has a better claim. His claim is based not on need or the good (moral) use to which the wealth would be put, but on his right to have it. And his right to have it

is based on no intrinsic grounds, but on the comparative fact that no one deserves it more than he does.

The only solution to greed is to stop looking at the world in terms of mere human justice, which usually comes out as what I deserve to get out of the world. That is the way pagans can look at the world. But it is not right for Christians. Christians are to see the world as God's creation, and themselves as His creatures and His chosen stewards for creation. That means that creation is not theirs, except in trust. They do not deserve any part of it (even their own lives!) by right. It is God's gift to them, for their own use, and entrusted into their care for its preservation for others' use.

It is hard for us to get around treating the world in terms of possession. We think of things as ours or someone else's. We think of things that we deserve, that we have earned, or otherwise ought to have. When we think of things in this way we tend to compare our right to them with others' rights to them. In this comparative approach to things, greed is almost unavoidable. For then we are trying to determine who ought to have what, according to our own notions of equality.

God does not operate this way. Instead of giving to each of his creatures exactly the same amount of everything, He gives to each what is best for him. The reason that each of us has what we have is not always clear to us. Our vision is limited, and we cannot always see things as God sees them. But even the deprivations which seem so inhuman and are the lot of some, He makes into the means of their redemption. No amount of wealth or poverty can keep us from God.

Several things follow from this insight. First of all, we cannot say that God loves one person more than another because He has given him more. Nor can we say the opposite: that the poor man is loved more. God's love is more subtle than that. It uses what each person has in accomplishing his redemption.

Second, it means that if we aspire to an imitation and sharing in God's perspective on the world, we must be ready to give up trying to understand the world in terms of who ought to possess what. God's perspective is that of who needs what, and of what everyone does with what they have. It is a matter of gift rather than earnings. It is not a matter of who has a right to some things -- for God gives all that anyone has anyway. As in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, He gives as He will to all His creatures. We trust that because He is a loving God, He gives us all that is best for us. That being the case, we are not in a position to question what he has given us, and demand more or something other than what we have.

To avoid the pitfalls of greed, we need to adopt God's way of looking at things. Otherwise we are bound to succumb. That means

that we must stop looking at things in terms of our rights to them. It is hard to do this, and we are constantly faced with the temptation to consider our rights against those of others. But we must beware. We must nip the temptation in the bud, before it has had a chance to grow large within us. It may grow to the point that we begin to assert our rights to God, to tell Him what He owes us, or to wring our hands at the injustices which are dealt us. What we are saying then is that we cannot be good Christians so long as these rights are denied. That -- as we learn from Jesus, whose human rights (to say nothing of the divine) were often denied -- is simply false. Before God, we have a right to nothing.

Then, in place of understanding wealth in terms of rights, we must understand it in terms of need and benefit. If the inheritance will benefit my brother more than me, I must be ready to rejoice when my father leaves it to him rather than to me. If it falls to him, that is cause for my happiness -- at least, if I will let go of my greed. The change of perspective is a matter of looking at it from the direction of benefit rather than that of right. This leaves us free to see the good that can be done with wealth, even if it seems to directly benefit someone else.

With this Christian perspective on things, our enjoyment of material things will be stripped of its greed. We will be able to enjoy them as we have them, giving thanks to God, but not becoming attached to them. We will not feel guilty if we have them, nor will we resent it if we don't. We will simply accept all that we have as God's gift, handed over to us for a time, to be used by us as responsible stewards. Our desire for the comfortable things of life will be of the non-greedy sort, for (with the apostle Paul) we will be able to give thanks in whatever situation we may find ourselves. We will know from the depths of our hearts that God is always doing what is best for us, to remake us in the image of His Son.

He will give us the great gift of Christian freedom, the freedom which we need if we are to keep our Lord enthroned in our hearts. It is the freedom to accept wealth as part of our human responsibility, the stewardship that God has given us. It allows us to use wealth subject to His direction. We need to maintain our aspiration to this freedom. The vision of it ought to have a place in our vision of the world. Only then will we be able to live Christian lives in the midst of our possessions. Only then will we be able to enjoy our possessions without being attached to them. Only then will we be delivered from the conflict between our possessions and the love of our God. For there need be no conflict: it is one of human invention. It comes from the sinful desire to possess and control things apart from obedience to God. It is an expression of man's desire to have an area subject to his control alone, apart from God. When we are willing to subject everything we are and have to God's sovereignty, then greed will have no place in us. We will be filled with the love which God has for all His creatures, and we will love even as we are loved.