

A Christian view on greed

In the beginning the world developed as a naturally balanced ecological system, which led to the development of human kind. In biblical times people knew the importance of caring for the natural environment in which they lived, because their own survival depended on it. This was still the situation up to recent times. However that did not prevent people from being greedy and the Bible condemns their behaviour. Greed from the perspective of a Christian environmentalist is a desire for wealth and material possession which has a negative impact on other people and the natural environment. While people may agree with this statement, explaining it from a theological and ethic perspective has its difficulties.

Biblical concept of greed

The Bible has only a few references to greed, but it does use words associated with it. These include the term to covet when referring to greedy behaviour or desire, or as in the tenth commandment not to covet. The Hebrew for covet is *hamad* meaning to covet, lust, desire, what is coveted is treasure, wealth, or that which is desirable, it is therefore an inordinate uncontrolled selfish desire as seen in greed.

The Bible records that not everyone lived according to God's laws. Throughout the Bible there are numerous references to the greedy exploiting the poor and seeking to accumulate excessive wealth. One example is in Proverbs "He who is greedy for unjust gain makes trouble for his household." (Proverbs 15.27) The problems caused by greed are therefore not a new phenomenon, but its impact has normally been contained within local communities, however in the global market of the twenty-first century the harmful impact has become more difficult to contain.

In the Bible, Amos, Jeremiah, Peter and Jesus all speak of greed as an evil, which encourages people to deal unfairly or unjustly with others for their own personal gain, the book of Amos provides a good example of this. Amos who was a shepherd could see the negative impact of greed and knew the importance of controlling harmful excesses, because of their harmful effect on the community. Amos spoke of a lust for money, "Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end." (Amos 8.4)

In his oratory he spoke of people's deceitful use of scales for unjust gain or dishonest gain. Amos, like other prophets, condemned the greed they saw within their communities. Jeremiah's heartfelt plea is a reflection of that by Amos. The severity of the criticism can be seen when he calls on the people to "cleanse their hearts of evil." (Jeremiah 4.14) (In the Bible the heart is seen as the centre not only of the spiritual activity, but of all operations of human life. In the modern world we understand that these thoughts and emotions are controlled by the mind.) Jeremiah, during his prophecy that Jerusalem would fall, makes clear reference to their greedy behaviour which was present in all sections of society. "For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain, and from prophet to priest, every one deals falsely." (Jeremiah 6:13). This statement is repeated in 8.10. When greedy people deal falsely with others to gain wealth, power, or material possessions, others will suffer loss that results in inequality and injustice.

In the New Testament, Jesus illustrates the folly of covetousness, by telling the parable of a greedy rich man, who stores up great wealth only to die before he could enjoy it. (Luke 12.13-21) From an environmentalist perspective Jesus' parable of a greedy rich man demonstrates how people can exploit the natural environment for their own gain, by growing crops to fill their barns without sharing their success with others. The Jewish laws, which instruct farmers to leave some of their crops to help the poor appears to have been ignored (Leviticus 19.9-10). Sadly too often those who are greedy for wealth do not help the poor in their local community, which is the point that Amos and Jeremiah were making.

Paul, when writing to the Corinthians includes the greedy in his list of disreputable people who go against God's laws. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Corinthians 6.9-10)

Christians believe in helping others, therefore greedy behaviour goes against the founding principles of Christianity, because it creates a situation where people treat others unfairly or unjustly to satisfy their own desires. Greed only creates happiness for a few. The actions of these greedy people go against the principle that all should be treated fairly and are subject to the same rules.

Contemporary theology

Greed is much more than a selfish or gluttonous desire for wealth, possession and food. Although in western countries there are growing levels of obesity, which can be caused through greed, while others in the world are starving this has to be of concern. Greed affects all aspects of human life and the harm it causes to others clearly demonstrates why it is regarded as a vice.

While this may enable the rich to grow richer, it does not take into account the concept of love your neighbour, because it encourages consumers to be greedy at the expense of the poor and the natural environment. While not all people have equal access to greed, the ethical consumer can have an impact on the positive effect in caring for the environment and challenging the attitudes of the greedy.

Christians in the twenty-first century live a pluralist society where their approach to caring for others and creation is not always accepted by others. Some sections of the community live by other faiths or philosophies, others are greedy, self centred and are driven by a desire for fame and fortune.

Christians along with the other groups that share their concerns have to work through persuasion, to help people to understand why they are concerned by this issue. All who care about the environment face a challenge when it comes to persuading the greedy consumers to change their consumption patterns to help protect the environment. This issue is discussed in some of the other articles on this website.

The Christian teaching on love thy neighbour means caring about all the people on earth, particularly those who are poor and vulnerable, who need help with housing, education, medical aid, and food production. But the greedy want to help themselves while ignoring others, which is contrary to Christian teaching.

Greed can therefore be defined as follows: It is a desire for wealth, money, material possessions and power way beyond a person's need. Some key aspects of greed, from the Christian point of view, include the following.

1. Its social nature. Greed is not a merely private or personal sin, but directly concerns our relationship to our neighbour. It is an inter-personal and social vice because it harms others and therefore is a failure in justice. Greed is therefore a sin against humanity.
2. Its spiritual nature. The greedy desire for wealth and material possessions is a form of idol worship that substitutes the love of material things for the worship of the one, true God. Greed is therefore a sin against God.

3. Its environmental nature. Greed disrupts the relationship of humanity to the environment, which can result in the exploitation of people and the natural environment.
4. It is the source of other sins. Greed can lead people to engage in deceitful actions aimed to take unfair advantage of others, violence and other forms of criminal behaviour that, directly or indirectly, harms others.
5. It is opposed by certain key Christian virtues. Opposed to greed are the Christian virtues of justice, compassion, charity and the true worship of God; someone who has these virtues will not be greedy, and someone who is greedy will not exhibit these virtues.

How this can be seen within a consumerist society and the negative impact greed has on the natural environment is examined in the other documents.

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