

ARE YOU NEEDY OR GREEDY?

Today's Text: 1 Tim. 6: 1-20

Extracts:

Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness [1 Tim. 6: 6-11]

In a study (reported in 1993) aimed at differentiating the needy from the greedy,¹ Professor Hessing and three other colleagues examined two groups of people receiving unemployment benefits: a fraudulent group of 45 individuals and an honest group of 51 individuals. They examined such variables as personal strain, personal orientation, perceived risk of punishment and intolerance of fraud. Their results showed that, even though financial strain and social norms did not differ between the two groups, the fraudulent group had more opportunity, were more inclined to take risks and had more positive attitudes toward fraud. In other words, you cannot tell if people are greedy until you see what they do with wealth after meeting their every imaginable personal need. While the needy are always riding the edge of poverty that makes them vulnerable to unexpected unfavourable outcomes, the greedy are seeking to increase wealth that has little or nothing to do with logic, common sense or morality.

Paul reached that same conclusion over two thousand years ago without doing a scientific survey! Speaking in Spirit, he warned the young evangelist, Timothy, that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil that had led some people to stray from faith “in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” [1 Tim. 6: 10]. Greed is an ever present danger today among believers as well as outsiders. What are you doing about it? How can you differentiate between being needy and being greedy? Those issues and more we shall try to deal with in today's very challenging study.

¹ D. J. Hessing, H. Elffers, H.S.J. Robben & P. Webley, “Needy or Greedy? The Social Psychology of Individuals Who Fraudulently Claim Unemployment Benefits,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 23, Issue 3, Feb. 1993, pp 226-243; <https://www.quora.com/General-Knowledge-What-is-the-difference-between-need-and-greed>

1. Background: It's a thin line between need and greed!

Agur, the son of Jakeh, prayed for two things which he asked the LORD not to deprive him of before he died: “Remove falsehood and lies far from me; ***give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with the food allotted to me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God***” [Prov. 30: 1, 7-9]. In that simple but powerful prayer, we can see the key ingredients that differentiate need from greed. When we lack, what do we do to satisfy it? When we become rich, what do we do with it? The story of man in the Garden of Eden and the behaviour of the children of Israel in the wilderness will enable us to answer those questions quite easily.

The Garden of Eden remains the best place to live by man. Adam and his wife, Eve, did not need to do anything because all their needs had been adequately met by God. There was no sickness and they were going to live forever. Even without going to school, Adam was the one who named every living creature that God made [Gen. 2: 1-20]. How many scientists today can do that? Yet, Adam and Eve were seduced by the serpent to lust for the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We are told, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of the fruit and ate [and] also gave to her husband with her, and he ate” [Gen. 3: 1-6]. ***That was the beginning of greed in human history.***

Let us fast-forward to the time that the children of Israel journeyed in the wilderness on their way from Egypt. They complained bitterly against Moses and Aaron. They said, “Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD ***in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full!*** For ***you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the whole assembly with hunger.***” God heard them and planned to rain down manna from heaven, adding, “And ***the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day,*** that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not” [Ex. 16: 1-4].

When the people saw “on the surface of the wilderness ... a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground,” they asked Moses what it was. He replied, “This is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat... ***Let every man gather it according to each one’s need.***” We are told that those who gathered much had nothing left over and those who gathered little had no lack. Thus, “every man gathered according to each one’s need” [vv. 14-18]. So far so good!

Then Moses instructed that no one should leave any of it till the following day. Some of them did and “it bred worms and stank.” Moses also instructed that the manna would not fall on the Sabbath day and that the people should gather twice as much bread on the sixth day, that is, the day before the Sabbath. But “some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none” [vv. 19-27].

What do we learn from those two stories? In the Garden of Eden, our first parents had everything they wanted. But, when temptation came, it did not stop them from lusting after the tree of life and death. In Egypt, the children of Israel had enough food to eat to everybody's "full." But, when there was little or nothing to go around, everybody looked needy! That was why God said that He would test them whether they would walk in His law or not. His test would separate the needy from the greedy! According to an African proverb, all snakes crawl on their bellies; so you cannot know which of them has belly-ache. ***Greed shows up only when lust is aroused. Therefore, to be greedy is to go against the word of God on how to use His blessings. So, what should we do when we lack? What should we do when we are blessed? How can we walk the path of righteousness on earth on our journey to eternity in heaven with all the traps of greed? Such are important matters for us to deal with in the body of Christ.***

Paul's First Letter to Timothy (Chapter 6) becomes very handy on the subject. Here are the key points for us to note in that chapter:

a) *Need and greed both flow from lack*

Paul wrote, "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" [1 Tim. 6: 7]. At birth, every baby comes naked. At death, the corpse is at best covered with a mere piece of cloth. At both points, we cannot help ourselves. We take what has been given to us. That is why Jesus said that people of faith need not worry about what to eat, drink or wear because His Heavenly Father has taken care of our needs [Matt. 6: 25-34].

Take the example of the Lord's miraculous feeding of five thousand men (besides women and children). From a lad's snack box containing only five barley loaves of bread and two small fish, Jesus fed the great multitude. Jesus said, "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost," and the fragments filled twelve baskets [Jn 6: 1-13]. God does not waste for "sufficient for the day is its own trouble" [Matt. 6: 34]. So, need and greed both flow from lack.

b) *But what we want may not be what we need!*

Paul wrote, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition" [1 Tim. 6: 9]. Need can be satisfied with just food, any food. But greed makes us pick and choose which food to ask for or eat. For example, we need food but why a special kind of omelets? We need transportation but why a Mercedes Benz car? Therefore, ***when what we want is not what we need, lust takes centre stage!***

Take again the example of the children of Israel in the wilderness. God had sustained them with manna and there was no evidence that they were malnourished. Instead of being grateful, they “yielded to intense craving, saying, ‘Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now, our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes’” [Num. 11: 1-6]. What they wanted was the food that they used to eat as people in bondage in a foreign land! That is greed for you.

c) *So where do we draw the line between need and greed?*

Paul also wrote, “And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” [1 Tim. 6: 8]. Writing to the Philippian church in appreciation of their generosity, Paul said, “Not that I speak in regard to need, for ***I have learned in whatever state I am to be content...*** Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ***I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me***” [Phil. 4: 11-13]. So, when you draw your satisfaction from God’s generous grace of giving you each day your daily bread [Matt. 6: 11], you are still operating in the realm of the needy. Beyond that, you are falling “into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition” [1 Tim. 6: 9].

Take the case of Judas Iscariot. Jesus knew that he was a thief. Yet, He made him the treasurer. Judas kept the money box and “he used to take what was put in it” [Jn 12: 6]. He was greedy! Did it then surprise you that he went on to take thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus to the Jewish leaders [Matt. 26: 14-16]? Therefore, we should learn to draw a sharp line between need and greed.

d) *What makes greed so dangerous?*

Paul writes, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” [1 Tim. 6: 10]. ***A greedy person has given up trusting in the living God who gives us richly all things to enjoy and, instead, trust in uncertain riches that lead to destruction and perdition [vv. 9, 17].***

See, for example, what greed did to Gehazi, the servant of Elisha? Through the ministry of the prophet Elisha, God had miraculously cured the Syrian general, Naaman, of his leprosy. The prophet refused the enormous gifts that he had brought because that would have amounted to payment for treatment in a specialist hospital abroad! In appreciation of his divine healing, the general took two mule-loads of earth to build a

place of worship back home so that “your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifice to other gods, but to the LORD.” Soon after he had left, Gehazi said, “Look, my master has spared Naaman this Syrian, while not receiving from his hands what he brought; but as the LORD lives, I will run after him and take something from him.” Elisha saw everything in spirit and said to Gehazi when he had returned, “Is it time to receive (gifts)? Therefore, the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever” [2 Kgs 5: 1-27]. Greed is that dangerous! Do you know how many pastors today invite ruin to themselves and their families for knowingly accepting tithes and gifts on ill-gotten wealth?

From the foregoing, we learn that God’s promise and provision is to meet all our need according to His riches by Christ Jesus [Phil. 4: 19]. Any and everything else is greed and it is dangerous to us- both now and in the hereafter [1 Tim. 6: 17-19]. So, are you needy or greedy? How can you guard against greed?

2. Guarding against greed

That poses a major challenge for the average believer. How do you navigate the slippery ditch between need and greed? The following guidelines may make your navigation clearer:

a) *First, choose your desirable outcome*

The starting point is to know what you need, that is, ***something that you consider essential for your existence or survival or even salvation***. Paul writes, “Godliness with contentment is great gain ... and having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” [1 Tim. 6: 6, 8]. David said, “One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple.” Why was such necessary to David? In time of trouble, the LORD would hide him in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle, He would hide him and set him high upon a rock [Ps. 27: 4-5].

What you need but cannot afford may have to do with what to eat, drink, wear, where to live, and so on. Beyond such basic economic needs, you may also have emotional and spiritual needs (such as love, friendship, etc.). So, what is your definition of success in such areas of life? Do you want joy or enjoyment?² After all, is the joy of the Lord not your strength [Neh. 8: 10]? Therefore, ***anything that is evil or will take your focus away from God you do not need***. Instead, “pursue righteousness,

² “Are you looking for joy or enjoyment?” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 11, No. 13; 18 Apr. 2010; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_11/Joyorenjoyment.pdf

godliness, faith, love, patience [and] gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith [and] lay hold on eternal life” [1 Tim. 6: 11-12].

b) *You don't need everything you can afford!*

Paul writes, “Command those who are rich in this present age ... [not] to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.” So, they should be “ready to give, willing to share” and that way store up for themselves “a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” [vv. 17-19].

Temptation comes when you have material wealth which you may not need. For example, instead of giving it to the needy, the rich fool opted to build a bigger barn. That night, God took his life and he died [Lk 12: 13-21]. After all, it is God who gave you power to get wealth- but for His purposes [Deut. 8: 17-18]. Therefore, *give away to others what you do not need so that you can create the space for God to meet your own higher needs!* Stay the course of probity, integrity and morality at all times.

Always remember: that which you may think that you need as you look at other people may be nothing but greed. For example, there are some people that you see as your Joneses- people that you look up to. They may be super stars in their chosen fields. They may be your mentors. You may want to have what they have or do what they do. In reality, however, you do not need such. After all, everybody who is in front of you may not necessarily be ahead of you- some may actually have missed their way! So, let God guide your choices. *Only your Heavenly Father knows what you need. That is Paul's message to us all today.*

3. Conclusion: Jesus is the Bread from Heaven!

The Jews came to Jesus and said, “Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Jesus replied them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” [Jn 6: 22-35]. Since you have accepted that same Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, you are sufficient. He knows ALL your needs and He will supply them as and when due!

So, fear not. You may remain needy while still in flesh but NEVER be greedy!