

If you were to ask the apostle Paul or someone else in the early church to construct a profile of your average pagan, those people who do not know the true and living God, you would have likely got a three-point sermon in response. Early Jews and Christians alike condemned the gentiles first of all for their idolatry, then for their sexual immorality and finally for their greed. In Luke 12:22-30, for example, the gentiles are described as those whose lifestyle is characterised by a relentless seeking after material things. In the letter of Polycarp, written soon after the close of the New Testament, greed is specifically distinguished as being a mark of the heathen (11:2).

On only two occasions in Acts is the opposition to the early church specifically non-Jewish. In both cases financial considerations caused the problems. In Acts 16 when Paul in Philippi cast the demon of divination out of the slave girl (vss. 16-18), her owners, who were incensed over their loss of income (v. 19), brought him before the magistrates to be flogged and imprisoned (vss. 20-24). Similarly, in Acts 19 Paul's stand against idolatry led to a riot led by the silversmiths who made the shrines to the goddess Artemis and regarded the apostle to be a threat to their livelihood (vss. 23-41).

To put the matter the other way around, greed not only suits a pagan's lifestyle, it is also not fitting behaviour for someone who knows God. In Colossians 3, Paul encourages the church not to be greedy because such behaviour is incompatible with a genuinely Christian lifestyle. Likewise, according to 1 Corinthians 5:11, people who claim to be Christians and are nonetheless greedy do not belong in the church and should be excluded.

Before the modern period, Christendom took greed just as seriously. In the fourth century Zeno of Verona declared simply: "God is right to hate greed." The greedy are as insatiable as hell, according to Basil the Great: "Hell never says enough is enough; neither does greed ever say enough." Ambrose thought greed so central that he spoke of the primal sin, that of Adam in the garden, not as original sin, but as "original greed".

In the Middle Ages an important vehicle for moral teaching was the so-called seven deadly sins: pride, lust, gluttony, sloth, anger, envy, and greed. Whereas Gregory the Great placed pride ahead of greed at the top of the list, in the numerous expositions in the centuries following him greed usually took pride of place. Medical metaphors were often used to describe the effects greed can have on people. Greed was not only a deadly sin but a deadly disease. Greed was commonly thought to be the spiritual equivalent of dropsy, which involves an insatiable thirst for water even though the body is already filled with fluid. The more the afflicted person tries to satisfy the thirst, the more it is stimulated. So it was thought to be the case with greed.

In the Protestant Reformation greed maintained its bad reputation. According to Martin Luther, for instance, greed causes unbelief and unbelief causes greed. Luther took the fourth request of the Lord's prayer, "give us our daily bread", as a call to shun greed. He also urged that every Christian undertake regular and earnest prayer against this dangerous vice.

Greed has been whitewashed and is a forgotten sin. Although greed can be profitably analysed in terms of sociological, psychological and economic factors, its root cause can only be understood with the help of theology. Greed is a theological problem. Indeed Colossians 3:5, points to the heart of the matter: "greed is idolatry", while 1 Timothy 6:6 gives an alternative: "godliness with contentment is great gain". There is nothing wrong with wanting to get really rich, as long as riches are properly defined.

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