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Greed as a False Religion¹

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This article considers the origin, meaning and contemporary relevance of Paul's condemnation of greed as idolatry. Although greed shows little sign of losing its grip on Western societies, misgivings about its capacity to deliver on its promises are increasingly being expressed. Even outside religious circles greed has been described unflatteringly as a disease and as a religion. The biblical notion of idolatrous greed provides the tools for a penetrating analysis of the driving motivations of greed and suggests the ultimate solution.

Doubts about Western materialism

In recent years a number of academics and social commentators have questioned the rampant materialism of the Western world. They argue that if people are trying to get rich in order to be happy, it isn't working. Elizabeth Farrelly wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that 'Western happiness has declined precisely in tandem with the rise of affluence'. Similarly, Ross Gittins claims that there is actually 'evidence that those who strive most for wealth tend to live with lower wellbeing'.

Why then do material ambitions still dominate so many of us? *Affluenza*, a book by Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, compares materialism to a disease. In their view the Western world is in the grip of a consumption binge that is unique in human history. We are addicted to excessive consumption. This plausible diagnosis is one that Christians have in fact made for centuries. In the Middle Ages theologians regarded greed not only as a deadly sin but also as a deadly illness. Greed was commonly thought to be the spiritual equivalent of dropsy, a malady that provoked an insatiable thirst for water even though the body was already filled with fluid. The more the sick person tried to satisfy their thirst, the more it was stimulated until finally death ensued. The comparison with the negative impact of greed is apt.

Other critics of greed have compared it to a religion. Two newspaper stories about materialism used religious rhetoric in their headlines: 'In greed we trust' (instead of 'in God we trust'); and 'A city obsessed – Through its worship of land and buildings, Sydney has found the stories that tell us who we are and what matters in life'. Another example is an obituary for high profile stockbroker Rene Rivkin that spoke of his 'once-loyal entourage of supporters who worshipped their high priest at the altar of wealth'. One review of Robert Kiyosaki's *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* commented that it 'isn't just a wealth creation manual, it's a religious tract'.

As it turns out, the comparison of greed with a religion is hardly original. The New Testament warns not infrequently of the religious power of money. Jesus charged that people either serve God or Mammon (i.e., possessions; Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). The apostle Paul believed that some people's god is their belly (Rom. 16:18; Phil. 3:19)² and he condemned greed as a form of idol worship (Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5).

The biblical condemnation of greed as a religion

What are we to make of the comparison of greed with religion? Are the New Testament denunciations of greed in terms of idolatry just arresting hyperbole? Can such extreme rhetoric help us in the fight against greed today?

The first thing to notice is that Jesus' and Paul's comparisons of greed with religion were more innovative in form or expression than in content. As it turns out, they have a firm basis in biblical theology. Two Old Testament ideas, especially when read in the light of early Jewish interpretation, may be noted as preparing for the startling judgement in question. First, the solemn words, 'you shall have no other gods before me' (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7), were early seen to have a *comprehensive scope*. The first commandment is not a warning against greed. However, as Martin Luther taught in his catechisms, it casts its bright light over all the others and is the source and fountain from which all the others spring. The Ten Commandments are interdependent. To break one is also to break the first. Indeed, ancient Jews took 'you shall have no other gods before me' to be foundational to the rest of the Decalogue and in some sense all-embracing: 'Whoever professes idolatry denies the Ten Words ... whoever denies idolatry, professes all of the Torah'.³ Thus the prohibition of idolatry was understood as having a broad rather than narrow reach.

A second idea that anticipates the comparison of greed with religion is the strong Old Testament *association of wealth with apostasy*.

Several texts in Deuteronomy set the scene for this disturbing theme. The famous confession of Deuteronomy 6:4 ('you shall love the Lord your God ...') offers a positive restatement of the first commandment. Interestingly, the Targumim of the Shema extends its relevance beyond the cultic and literal to a specific ethical application. Instead of enjoining the love of God with all one's heart, soul and strength, it calls for full allegiance in terms of one's heart, soul and *possessions* or *money*. The identification of material things as a threat to fidelity to God is also underscored in chapter 8, which warns those entering the Promised Land not to allow their prosperity to lead them to forget the Lord (Deut. 8:12-14). The lesson is reinforced in the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32: newly acquired wealth will lead the people into apostasy (see vv. 10-15): 'Jeshurun ['the upright one,' i.e., Israel] grew fat ... and abandoned the God who made him' (v. 15).

Comparable warnings appear across the Old and New Testaments. For example, the sage prays that God will not give him riches, lest he 'may have too much ... disown [God] and say, 'Who is the Lord?' (Prov. 30:7-9). Job explains that, 'if I have put my trust in gold or said to pure gold, 'You are my security' ... I would have been unfaithful to God on high' (Job 31:24-28). In Luke's Gospel, with reference to the teaching of Jesus, the dangers riches pose to entering the kingdom of God are evident in the parable of the rich fool (12:13-21), the encounter with the rich ruler (18:18-30) and in the calls to renounce possessions and give to the poor (14:33; 18:22).

The interpretation of Colossians 3:5 and Ephesians 5:5

Having established that the concept of greed as a religion has deep roots in the Bible, it remains to consider what the comparison might actually signify. The difficulty in the case of the judgement that *greed is idolatry* in Colossians and Ephesians is that the words appear in vice lists, which unfortunately supply little or no contextual help for their interpretation.

Not surprisingly, then, the history of interpretation reveals a range of opinion. Many commentators merely state the obvious: the expression serves to blacken greed, which is being equated with idolatry, the most heinous sin of all. Most of those that have thought more deeply take the predication of greed and idolatry to be a metaphor. Richard Hays helpfully defines metaphor as an 'incongruous conjunction of two semantic fields that turn out, upon reflection, to be like one another in ways not ordinarily recognized. They shock us into thought by positing unexpected analogies'.⁴

In what ways are greed and idolatry alike? Over the centuries three answers to this question have been suggested. Whereas most twentieth-century interpreters see *love* as the point of similarity, the Reformer Martin Luther identified *trust* and the Church Father Chrysostom *service*. Do the greedy person and the idolater love, trust and serve their money and their idols respectively? All three suggestions may in fact be correct.

The Bible underscores love, trust and service as three core responses of the believer in relation to God, and faults both the idolater and the greedy person for foolishly misdirecting these same three. Both idolaters and the greedy 'set their hearts' on inappropriate objects. Both 'rely on,' 'trust in,' and 'look to' their 'treasures' for protection and blessing. Both 'serve' and 'submit to' things that demean rather than ennoble the worshipper.

The mammon saying in Matthew and Luke confirms that the figurative versatility of greed as idolatry allows for the three interpretations. In its immediate context the warning that you cannot serve both God and Money uses both the verbs 'to love' and 'to serve'. With respect to love, the synonym 'devotion' and the antonyms 'hate' and 'despise' are also in view:

No one can be a loyal servant to two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money (Matt. 6:24; TNIV).

Significantly, the third response of trust is evident in the following context of Matthew 6:25-34 which supply a negative judgment on trusting in wealth. Jesus points to the birds and the lilies in order to inspire trust in God's providential care and to calm anxiety about material things that provokes us to seek them obsessively: 'the pagans [those who do not know God] run after all these things, and your heavenly father knows that you need them' (v. 32).

Greed is idolatry in that, like the literal worship of idols, it represents an attack on God's exclusive rights to human love, trust and service. Material things can replace God in the human affections and set us on a course that is opposed to him, even arousing his jealousy.

The contemporary relevance of idolatrous greed

Is greed a religion today? It does seem that for many of us material things hold a place in our lives that was once occupied by belief in God. The economy has achieved what might be described as a sacred status. Like God, the economy, is capable of supplying our needs without limit. Also, like God, the economy is mysterious, dangerous and intransigent, despite the best managerial efforts of its associated clergy. If once our most vivid experiences were religious, today they involve money rituals. For example, the modern day equivalent of the city cathedral is the shopping complex. On her *Up!* album, Shania Twain sings: 'We've created us a credit card mess. We spend the money that we don't possess. Our religion is to go and blow it all. So it's shoppin' every Sunday at the mall'.

As we noted above, the very things Christianity claims God expects of believers, namely love, trust and service, may well characterize our relationship with money. A glance at the palpable glee on the faces of game show contestants confirms our love of money and our belief that you can literally buy securities and futures. Most disturbingly, as the French ethicist Jacques Ellul put it, 'we can use money,

but it is really money that uses us and makes us servants by bringing us under its law and subordinating us to its aims'.⁵

That idolatry provides such a good analogy for greed indicates that the latter, as well as being a psychological, sociological and economic problem, may also be understood theologically. The ultimate solution to the insatiable grasping for, and obsessive hoarding of, material things that marks our age is not simply to say no to something of limited value, but to say yes to something better. Jesus' concluding exhortation on the subject of greed in the Sermon on the Mount amounts to such a redirection of desire: 'The pagans run after such things. ... But seek first his kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matt. 6:32-33).

Economists may recommend greed, politicians rely on it and celebrities flaunt it, but in the end like all idols money fails to deliver on its promises. If the root cause of materialism is misdirected religious impulses, then the ultimate solution is still faith in the true and living God who alone gives the security and satisfaction that each of us craves.

End Notes

1. This article is adapted from the author's *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Eerdmans, 2007).
2. Karl Olav Sandnes, *Belly and Body in the Pauline Epistles* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) argues that in pagan moral philosophy the belly became a catchword for a life controlled by pleasures.
3. *Sifre Numbers* 111 and *Sifre Deuteronomy* 54.
4. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (T. & T. Clark, 1997), 300.
5. Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (IVP, 1979), 76.

For further reading

- Blomberg, Craig, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (NSBT; IVP, 1999).
- Hamilton, Clive and Denniss, Richard, *Affluenza: When too much is never enough* (Allen & Unwin, 2005).
- Ramanchandra, Vinoth, *Gods that Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission* (IVP, 1996).
- Rosner, Brian S., *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Eerdmans, 2007).
- Rosner, Brian, *Beyond Greed* (Matthias, 2004).

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