

The Problem with Abundance (Michael Bressemer, Ph.D.)

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People are rarely satisfied with having enough. Many say to themselves, “If a little is good, then surely more is better.” This belief appeals to our desire for greater freedom: we want a larger selection to choose from to appease whatever mood strikes us at the moment. And people laud freedom as if it is a virtue. Liberty is perceived as an essential human right along with life and the pursuit of happiness. Yet, freedom adds nothing to our character; rather, freedom places us in a position to be more vulnerable to temptation and so possibly lose our moral standing. In fact, virtue is more likely to arise when we limit our freedoms than expand them. Regardless, secular society is in a mad dash to give us more freedom by offering an “abundance” (*abundare* from Latin meaning “overflow”).



We want more channels on TV, more commodities on superstore shelves, more clothing shops at mega-malls, more dishes on restaurant menus, more recreational

toys to play with on weekends, more features on electronic gadgets, etc. Of course to indulge in these freedoms and add to our abundance, we need more money which means we will work longer hours or go into more debt; thereby, we risk increasing the likelihood of developing stress-related health disorders and having relational conflicts. Also, the time it takes to shop for and then play with our new “whatever” mentally distracts us from contemplating more important matters. In this modern age, who takes the time to quietly reflect: to take stock of our lives and learn lessons contributing to our spiritual growth?

Consider some of the other consequences of abundance: It increases an attitude of entitlement among youth. Each passing generation becomes more desperate for what is media touted as a “must have;” they don’t value the patience and diligence needed to labor many years for their desires, but instead selfishly proclaim they deserve to have it “Now!” Greater freedom is increasingly leading us to measure our self-worth and social status based on our abundance, and those who don’t have access to “all that life has to offer” are to be pitied. Abundance is complicating our lives with an ever ending list of new manuals to read, new machines to maintain, new web sites to explore, new games to play on tablet devices, new people to add to our social network, etc. Much of our populace are losing their souls in a morass of plenitude.

Further, it is not commerce that is to blame for our predicament. It is the nature of secular businesses to compete in the market by expanding the number of products they offer, and by continually innovating and promoting their merchandise. Rather, it is us Christians who are to blame for not exhibiting to the world a better way to live. Too many believers have fallen toward a desire to continually acquire more. The prevailing attitude amongst modern Christians seems to be: “I work hard, I support the Church, I occasionally contribute money to charities, so who are you to tell me I cannot freely shop for and own the world’s wares?” Yet, the Bible and the Church Fathers do speak against over-indulging in freedom of choice and having an abundance; they tell us we need to courageously discipline ourselves from society’s material, social, and recreational *greed*.

The Unspoken Deadly Sin

Greed seems to be a taboo topic in affluent countries. Industries grow and national economies are strong in part due to people’s greed. Therefore, there is a silent pact amongst the prosperous that we don’t question our abundance, and we don’t shame one another by labeling our frequent shopping sprees as greed. Rather, we want to view ourselves as contributing to our nation’s stability with every swipe of our credit card. We tend to believe spending every nickle we own, or we can

borrow, makes us good citizens. We have turned our vice into a patriotic virtue—despite the Biblical warning, “woe to those who call evil good” (Isaiah 5:20).

Greed was considered a major sin by the Church Fathers. Evagrius Pontikos, a fourth century desert ascetic, listed *philargyria* (from Greek meaning “the love of silver”) as one of eight chief passions. Saint Gregory the Great, patriarch of Rome from 590-604, lists *avaritia* (from Latin meaning “greedy” derived from *avere* meaning “to desire”) as belonging to the classic list of seven deadly sins. Greed is not just an immoderate desire for money or property, but it is also an obsessive wanting of position, social attention, and time to play. It needs to be mentioned again how contrary to the values of modern society this is: amassing a fortune, being ambitious, seeking fame, and having plenty of leisure opportunities are considered by the world as worthwhile goals! You cannot be imprisoned for having too much of these; rather, you are likely to be *envied* (also one of the seven deadly sins).

That greed is a deadly sin was exemplified in the Holy Bible by Gehazi’s leprosy (4 Kingdoms 5), Judas’ suicide (Matthew 26:14-16; 27:3-5), and Ananias and Sapphira taking their last breath (Acts 5:1-10). The reason the sentence was so dire in Scripture was because greed was considered *idolatry*. Rather than relying on God for our joy or contentment, greed influences us toward excessively seeking happiness from the world. Our Lord said:

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24).

Jesus knows we are motivated by a strong desire for security and comfort. We attach ourselves to either God or “mammon” (worldly riches) to fulfill those needs; and what we set our heart on becomes our master by demanding our attention and by setting our priorities (Matthew 6:21). It wasn’t just to more equitably distribute wealth that our Lord asked the rich man to sell what he owns and give it to the poor; rather, our Lord was addressing the need for the rich man to change what it is he values and to whom he was going to give his allegiance (Matthew 19:16-30).

“Covetousness” (*pleonexia* from Greek meaning “to have one’s fill”) is the most common word found in the New Testament for greed. St. Paul directly called covetousness “idolatry” (Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5). Greed leads to devoting ourselves to the false god of worldly abundance. This idol was named by St. John as “Babylon the Great,” who is “arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls,” and “the merchants of the earth have become

rich through the *abundance* of her luxury” (Revelation 17:4; 18:3; emphasis added). This is in stark contrast to God’s faithful who are more simply attired in “white garments” made of “fine linen, clean and bright” (Revelation 3:5; 19:8).

Besides idolatry, the other reason greed is a major sin is that it leads to other vices. Gambling, prostitution, illegal drug use, alcoholism, exploiting the poor, and other immoral practices are often a temptation of the affluent.

“The amassing of money fuels the passions, for it leads to increasing indulgence in all kinds of sensual pleasure.” — St. Thalassios

A Spiritual Cancer

Greed does not arise from a bodily need for food, water, sleep, or sex, nor is greed a corruption of these desires (as is gluttony, sloth, and lust). Rather, greed is solely an abuse of our freedom.

“Avarice is a passion deriving not from our nature, but solely from an evil and perverted use of free will.” — St. John Cassian

Greed is the free choice we make to obsessively fantasize about and compulsively acquire more. It is a slap to our Father’s face as we ungratefully complain that what He provides is not good enough. And what is insidious about greed is there is never a limit to how much will fully satisfy; like the ancient Greek myth of King Midas, we want everything we touch to turn to gold. Solomon wisely identified greed as an illness:

“There was a sickness I saw under the sun: wealth kept for its owner to his hurt” (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

No sane person would choose to give himself a physical disease; yet, we freely choose to corrupt our souls by greed. St. Maximos the Confessor discerned the reasons for this illness:

“There are three things which produce love of material wealth: self-indulgence, self-esteem and lack of faith. Lack of faith is more dangerous than the other two. The self-indulgent person loves wealth because it enables him to live comfortably; the person full of self-esteem loves it because through it he can gain the esteem of others; the person who lacks faith loves it because, fearful of starvation, old age, disease, or exile, he can save it and hoard it. He puts his trust in wealth rather than in God, the Creator who provides for all creation, down to the least of living things.”

Greed is not only a sickness but it is also foolishness as it does nothing to advance

us toward Christ-likeness. St. Peter of Damaskos called avarice “ridiculous,”

“For those who with great labor mine silver, and hide it in the earth again, remain without any profit.”

The foolishness of greed, our hoarding possessions, is exactly what Jesus addressed in the parable of the man with the plentiful harvest (Luke 12:16-21). This farmer planned to build bigger barns to store his crops and goods, but his life was suddenly taken from him (another example of how “deadly” greed is). Jesus told his disciples,

“Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the *abundance* of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15; emphasis added).

Yet, there is a place for abundance in a Christian’s life: an abundance of spiritual understanding (Matthew 13:12; Philippians 1:9-11); an abundance of spiritual gifts (Matthew 25:29); and, an abundance of grace (Romans 5:15-17; 2 Corinthians 9:8-14), peace (1 Peter 1:2; 2 Peter 1:2), and love (1 Timothy 1:14, Jude 1:2). Jesus can provide us a spiritually abundant life (John 10:10); yet, this abundance from God is usually only available to us in proportion to how much we spurn the abundance the world offers (Matthew 5:3).

What Can Be Done?

Those of us possessing a worldly abundance need to confess our sin and repent. We would do well to heed Holy Scripture’s warning that the greedy will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10; Ephesians 5:5).

Second, we need to go on a lifestyle diet and shed some material possession weight. A business growing in popularity presently is that of renting storage units. Despite the fact the average house built today is 2-3 times larger than those built 50 years ago, we seemingly do not have enough room in our dwellings for all our things. Even if we don’t have a storage unit, many of us are on a continual quest for “home improvement”—renovating and replacing our functional fixtures and furnishings with more expensive decor. Yet, Solomon warned,

“He who makes his own house lofty seeks destruction” (Proverbs 17:18).

Third, we should severely limit how often we go shopping. Perhaps the biggest leisure activity today is that of browsing the malls, the internet, mail order catalogs, or TV shopping networks for new things to entice our eyes. This activity is contrary to what St. Paul stated as one of the distinctions of being a Christian:

“We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Others of us need to limit how much extra time we give to our jobs to feed our ambition. Some of us need to restrain ourselves from spending excessive time social networking to grow our list of friends. And, many of us need to discipline how much time we selfishly indulge in various entertainments—particularly watching TV, movies, and playing video games. If we don’t have a modest boundary, a self-imposed rule that limits our freedom in each of these areas, then we likely have cause to be ashamed.

Fourth, we need to exhort our fellow Christians to not be greedy. It may be the wealthy who contribute a lot of what our parishes need for their budget; however, if those same materially prosperous Christians are giving more attention to increasing the worth of their financial portfolio than perfecting their souls, then their values have become dangerously askew. St. Paul advised us to not “keep company” with a greedy Christian, “not even to eat with such a person” (1 Corinthians 5:11).

Finally, the chief cure for the sickness of greed is generosity. There are many Orthodox charities that would greatly benefit from our abundant wealth and volunteering our extra time. St. Maximos stated,

“The presence of the passion of avarice reveals itself when a person enjoys receiving but resents having to give.”

Straying From The Faith

The freedom to choose the world's abundance doesn't actually make us more free; rather, excessive possessions, ambition, seeking social attention, and recreational pursuits all only burden and distract our hearts and minds from the path of righteousness. Let us no longer hide our shame but confess our sin of greed; then we should repent by limiting our freedom of choice and by freely giving our abundance away. This takes courage for we are too attached to our things and our lifestyle, but we cannot have faith without taking a risk.

"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" (1 Timothy 6:6-10).