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Greed

On the Necessities of Life

In this life our existence is surrounded by certain necessities which hold a tight grip on us from the day that we are born. Some of these necessities such as food, clothes and shelter are basic and the preservation of life's system depends on them. Needs of this type are natural and cannot be taken care of permanently. The other type of needs are non-essential and are constantly changing and can never be totally fulfilled.

According to natural motives and the sense of need, man seeks money and struggles with all his might against all problems and difficulties which may stand in his way to make more money for to most people wealth is the beauty of life.

It is natural for the condition of men to vary in this field. For instance, if a man is surrounded by poverty and weakness, he starts to seek sustenance by all means possible trying to eradicate the poverty which surrounded him. If a man has acquired wealth, he becomes inflicted with conceit and arrogance as if there was a direct relationship between wealth and the latter traits. Finally, if a man acquires wealth and security for himself, he becomes intoxicated with conceit and arrogance and evil inspirations endlessly battle his mind.

Life takes various forms depending on how every individual views it and because the reasoning ability differs from person to person. For example there are many people who have not realized the truth or reached the stage where they can distinguish between places of safety and danger.

Realization of the facts of life, and reaching the state of happiness requires precision in the secrets of existence, especially the secret of "knowing one's self which can only be done in the domain of reason and logic.

Man must understand why he is in this world in order to start his search for happiness. He must choose the method with which he can advance according to his natural and spiritual needs while refraining from shortcomings that separate the soul from the realistic growth of one's personality.

Yet, success and happiness do not mean that man must constantly excel over others in exploiting material resources, for material matters are not the main goal in life and man should not violate the borders of morality and piety to make material gains.

According to Dr. Carl:

"Personal interests overtake our minds in the ideological atmosphere which liberal materialism founded. Wealth has come to be the greatest talent in our eyes and success is now measured by currency bills.

"A society which gives priority to economical affairs can never be inclined to morality which requires complete obedience to the laws of life. An individual who excludes all affairs but the economical ones from his day-to-day struggle cannot adhere to the natural laws of life. Morality. undoubtedly, leads us to the truth and organizes all our physical and psychological activities in accordance to the human system. Moral excellence may be compared to strong engines which function properly. Dissention in a society is not but a consequence of immorality"

The authentic aim of life is to achieve spirituality. Spirituality is the most important and valuable matter which man can achieve. He who keeps his soul confined to spiritual treasures seldom needs this world, for he gains spiritual satisfaction in the shadow of spirituality which accompanies him for the rest of his life. Such an individual would not exchange his spiritual wealth for material gains under any conditions.

A Greedy Person is Never Satisfied

Coveting the belongings of others is a psychological state that forces the individual to pursue materialism in a matter that makes material gains an axis on which the mind rotates.

Material inclination arises from uncontrollable greed. Because of the imaginary happiness that it creates, greed is considered a factor which brings misery into the lives of men. As a result man disregards everything and sacrifices all moral traits in his quest towards gathering wealth until finally the feelings of want become rooted deep in his soul.

Dr. Schopenhauer said:

"It is rather difficult to define the inclinations which are related to acquiring wealth because individual's satisfaction varies greatly and there is not a defined scale by which people's wants can be judged. Some people are satisfied with small amounts of money that meet their necessities while others com-plain about their unhappiness despite their abundant wealth (which vastly surpasses their needs). Therefore, everyone has certain limits to his wants by which he fulfills his hopes. Yet, when man experiences difficulties on this path he complains and may give up.

"The vast wealth of the rich does not deceive the poor. Wealth is like salt water the more you drink the thirstier you become."

Indeed, the greedy will never be satisfied with all the sustenance of the world just as fire burns all the fuel that it is given!!

When greediness rules a nation, it transforms its social life into a field of disputes and dissention in the place of justice, security and stability. Naturally, in such a society moral excellence and spirituality do not stand a chance.

It should be noted, however, that there is a great difference between money worship and the desire for advancement, including that of material features. Hence, it is important to draw a line between these two aspects for there is no righteous justification preventing human societies from seeking advancement and excellence in the shadows of nature and talents.

The endeavor of the greedy creates a chain of miseries for his society, for he intends to acquire his lusts with unjust methods including methods which may bring poverty to others. One who covets seizes the sources of wealth in order to acquire more for himself and consequently creating acute economical problems.

Some people claim that wealth is a source that fulfills many desires, so they give it their greatest attention. In fact, it is the poor who have excelled in the most honorable and greatest fields in history. Writers, inventors and scientists were mainly from the poor class.

Furthermore, vast wealth is destructive to many people. For example, when youth inherit large sums of money they generally disregard all avenues of education and knowledge drowning themselves in sin and lusts because they feel no need for work or development.

Once a wealthy man visited a famous Greek philosopher. The latter did not trust the wealthy man so he did not make any special arrangements for his visit. The philosopher said to the wealthy man:

"Surely you have not come to learn from me but to put me down for my financial situation, am I not right?

The wealthy man replied:

"Had I followed your path in acquiring knowledge 1 would not have had wealth, a palace, servants, etc."

At this the philosopher said:

"Regardless of Your material belongings, I am richer than you. I do not need servants to protect me, for I fear no-one including Caesar. Because you are dependent on others you will always be poor. I possess reason, satisfaction and the freedom to think instead of gold and silver, while you waste your time thinking about silver plates.

"My ideas are my vast empire where I live happily, while you spend your lifetime in anxiety and unrest.

All that which you possess is worthless to me, but what I possess is abundant for you will never fulfill all your hopes and wants, but my needs are always fulfilled by using my reason.

Surely everyone should rely on knowledge and not on gold and silver; for only the ignorant rely on them.

Felicity and dissatisfaction undoubtedly are a part of everyone's life; each having its place in the events of life. Everyone who enters this world shall experience a portion of both regardless of his material condition. Here we can safely say that wealth, which exceeds one's needs is useless in finding happiness.

According to Socrates many individuals do not possess money, gems, fancy garments, or palaces, yet their lives are a thousand times happier than the lives of the wealthy.

Surely the greedy is a humiliated, poor slave to the world and its money. He has surrendered his neck to the chains of wealth and has submitted to immature thoughts. The greedy imagines that his wealth, which is enough for generations of his descendants, is not but a reserve for his gloomy days. Only when the bells of danger and death ring does a greedy man realizes his mistakes.

When the bell rings to announce the final seconds of his life, he looks at his wealth, for which he has wasted all his life, with sorrow and disappointment knowing that it is useless to him in his grave–the grave to which he carries sorrows for the many errors he has committed throughout his life.

Fair Distribution in Islam

Along with its call upon people to struggle and advance Islam included a strong warning against fanatical adherence to materialism. Islam declares that such adherence deprives man from seeking the real goal of life, the eternal happiness. Imam al-Baqir (a.s.) gave the following description of the greedy man:

"An example of the greedy man of this world is that of the silkworm. The more silk that it spins around itself, the less of a chance it has to survive until it finally suffocates itself."1

The Messenger of Allah (S) said:

"Refrain from greed for those who were before you perished as a result of greed. Greed commanded them to be stingy and they obeyed: it ordered them into alienation and they obeyed; and it commanded them to sin and they sinned."2

Imam 'Ali (a.s.) pointed out the misery which results from coveting when he said:

"Avoid greed for its champion is the captor of humiliation and exhaustion,"3

Dr. Mardin said:

"Wealth is not everything in man's life, nor does his real happiness lie in collecting money. Nevertheless, many young people make the mistake of believing that money is the most important matter in life. They, therefore, waste the primes of their life seeking wealth while depriving themselves of everything else. This is a very mistaken way of thinking and it is one of the reasons behind many people's miseries.

"We struggle to acquire grand clothes, etc thinking that they are the ways to happiness: while in fact they only bring –disappointment and deprivation to us".4

Imam 'Ali (a.s.) said:

"A greedy person is a captor of humiliation, whose captivity does not cease.5

The righteous religion of Islam, which conforms to mans nature, equally distributes between materialism and spirituality. It has, therefore, chosen a path for its followers that guarantees healthy spirits and bodies. Religious individuals possess wise and righteous spirits for they understand divine facts.

Satisfaction is a unceasing treasure, for its possessors endeavor to acquire only what they have a need for. Those with reason organize their lives and avoid polluting their spiritual happiness with mistaken attempts to collect wealth and lowliness. An individual who is satisfied is happy with what he ethically acquires.

This sufficient method allows him to reach the real goal of life (moral excellence); in this matter he achieves real wealth (that is satisfaction) which brings him harmony and does not need to ask for that which is in the hands of others.

Imam 'Ali (a.s.) said:

"It is best to submit and adhere to satisfaction and piety, and to relieve one's self from covetousness and greed; for greed and covetousness are present poverty and submission and satisfaction are apparent wealth." 6

He also pointed out the spiritual and psychological disorders which affect the covetous when he said:

"One who covets brings illness." 7

Dr. Mardin said:

"Certain thoughts which arise from greed, covetousness, and all other psychological reactions not only adversely affect the body but also the soul. They, therefore, deprive us of a good living and change the path of harmonious living. Greed and covetousness destroy all natural human traits in us.8

Imam 'Ali (a.s.) is quoted as saying:

"Greed pollutes the soul. corrupts religion and destroys youthfulness." 9

The Messenger of Allah (S) explained the afflictions and calamities which arise from greediness. He said:

- "A greedy person faces seven acute problems:
- 1) Worrying, which harms his body and is disadvantageous to him;
- 2) Depression, which is endless;
- 3) Exhaustion, from which death is the only relief–and with that relief the greed shall be more exhausted;
- 4) Fear, which uselessly disturbs his life;
- 5) Sadness, which uselessly disturbs his life;
- 6) Judgment, which does not save him from Allah's torture unless Allah forgives him.
- 7) Punishment, from which there is no escape or avoidance."10

Greediness: is surely an evil desire which leads man to humiliation and sin. Imam 'Ali (a.s.) said:

"greed is a motive for evil." 11

He (a.s.) also said:

"The fruit of covetousness is complaining about shortcomings." 12

Dr. S.M. Caughaust said:

"Stealing stems from greed. Thieves steal that which they do not own because they covet it. He who steals a pair of socks from a merchant, or a bicycle entrusted to him, only does so because of the influence of covetousness to possess things. Thus, the thieves motive for stealing is covetousness." 13

Here we conclude that greed – this dangerous spiritual disorder–can be treated by believing in Allah and the Last Day. Satisfaction can only be achieved by strengthening one's spirituality and developing moral excellence.

- 1. Usul al-Fasahah
- 2. Nahj I-Fasahah p. 199
- 3. Ghurar al-Hikam p. 135
- 4. Khishtan Sazi
- 5. Ghurar al-Hikam p. 50
- 6. Ghurar al-Hikam p. 255
- 7. Ghurar al-Hikam p. 544
- 8. Pirozi Fikr
- 9. Ghurar al-Hikam p. 77.
- 10. Mustadrak al- Wasa'il v.2, p. 435

- 11. Ghurar al-Hikam p. 16
- 12. Ghurar al-Hikam p. 360
- 13. Chi Midanam

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