

Fearful **GREED** & Trembling **HOPE**

The timely vice and virtue

Greed is a timely vice. The financial news, economic reports, and unemployment statistics continuously remind us, as if our own monthly bills and conversations with our neighbors were not telling us, that we are struggling to regain our bearings after the last several years of greed in the banking industry. When we hear of the major banks receiving bailouts after years of excess, and then giving billions in bonuses to their top executives, we stagger to grasp a situation out of control. When we read stories of these same bank executives securing their own private stock of H1N1 vaccines before other target populations are allowed access to immunization, we strain to understand the behavior of those for whom money can buy anything.

But perhaps we are being too harsh on our bankers. After all, this latest round of greed writ large has descended upon us just after our recovery from greed in the energy industry exemplified by Enron, which came just after the illness of “infectious greed” that Alan Greenspan diagnosed during the 1990s Wall

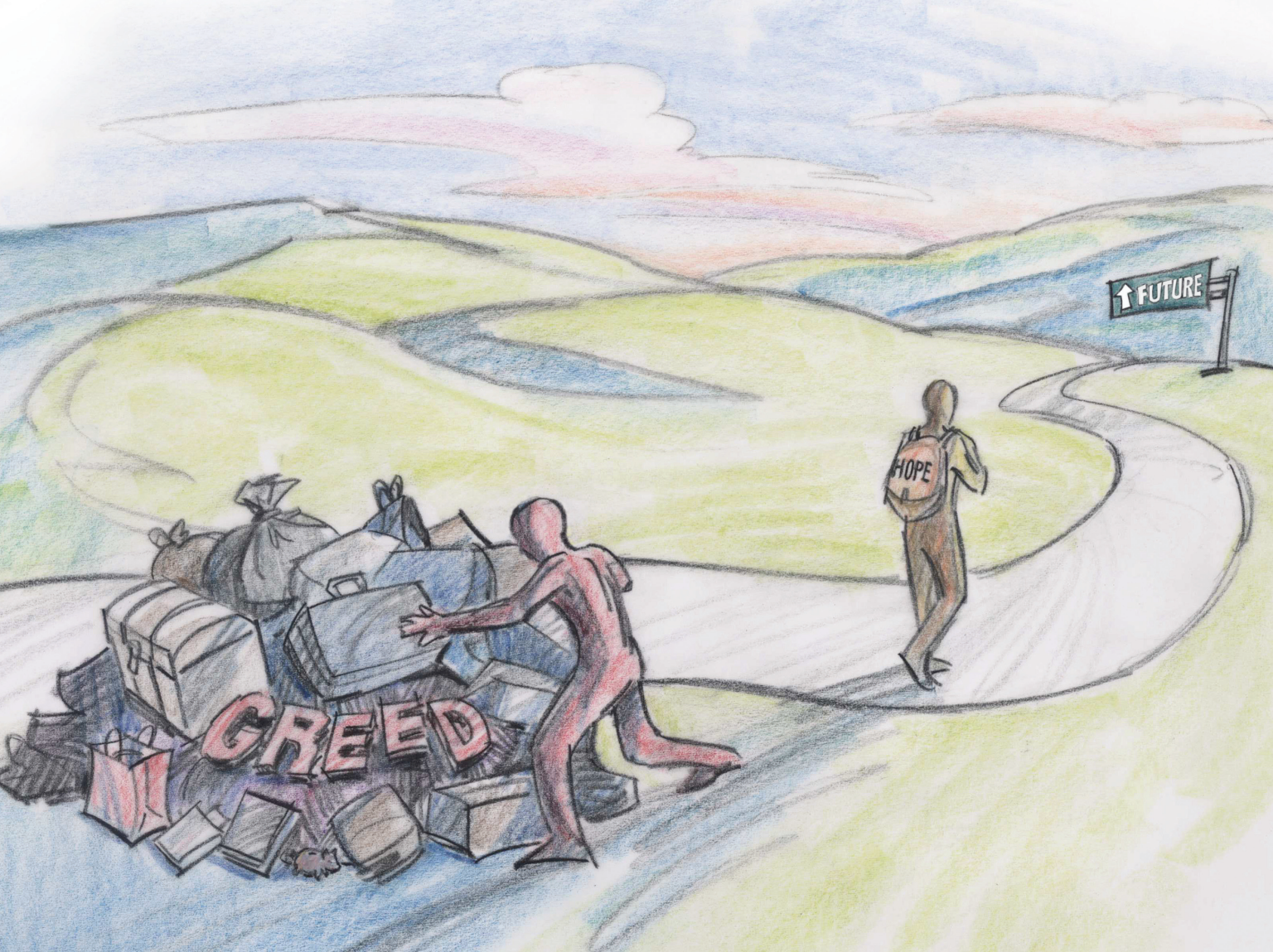
Street and dot-coms surge, which, of course, followed on the heels of greed within the 1980s Detroit auto industry, which followed closely after the 1970s greed for Middle Eastern oil... If greed is a vice that is never satisfied, cultures that suffer its ill effects never seem to learn their lesson either. And yet, a national conversation has begun again, as it always does in the bust cycle of the economic roller coaster. Among the seven deadly sins, greed is a timely vice to consider.

In this installment of our series on the seven deadly vices and the seven holy virtues, we consider the vice of greed and the virtue of hope. Like the previous articles, we aim to show essential aspects of these virtues and vices by pairing them side by side. For example, when we examined *pride* and *wisdom* together we discovered that pride actually is rooted in a kind of ignorance and wisdom is a kind of humility. When we addressed *sloth* and *faith*, we learned that sloth is the inability to receive goodness and God as gifts, while faith is the capacity to receive such graces. Our question in this issue is, what can we learn when we examine together the vice of *greed* and the virtue of *hope*?

Virtues and vices are the orderings and disorderings of our desires, which have been habituated over time by a series of wise or poor choices or encouraged by good or bad mentors. Unlike a worldview such as Buddhism, which admonishes the extinction of all desire from the human soul, Christianity teaches the proper cultivation of desires. But if we as Christians are to cultivate our desires, and indeed to arouse those that are good, the desires shaped by greed become tricky to nail down.

Like all the vices in their infancy within the human heart, greed is subtle in its mimicry of otherwise good desires. In their youth, pride impersonates self-respect, sloth looks like sabbath, and lust feels like vitality. Greed too masquerades as an otherwise good desire that includes our attachment to place, earthly goods, and even family and friends. Once habituated into a vice, however, greed enslaves people to their own acquisitiveness. The desired objects we initially used as servants to achieve higher goods, drag us down until we are defined—and mastered—by them.

In this regard, greed appears



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to belong in the triad of vices that include gluttony and lust. As gluttony is to food, and lust is to sex, so greed is to wealth. All are distinguished by the distortion of the desired through an excessive attachment to the desire itself, which results in an activity akin to frenetic consumption that reduces the desired to a means of immediate self-satisfaction. Greed distorts our attachments because it demotes everything it desires to something that can be merely bought, possessed, owned, or controlled. Those goods that properly can be possessed, owned, and controlled—of which money is the quintessence—offer no satisfaction unless they are used for the sake of goods that cultivate our higher order desires for love, family, sense of place, church, and God. The only solution for this lack of fulfillment is to make

acquisition itself the highest good.

In its most evident form, greed manifests a particular form of covetousness with respect to money and wealth. In Genesis, Abram and Lot display the gulf between the virtue and vice with regard to our attachment to wealth. Having been given the first choice of land, Lot greedily seizes the best for himself, leaving the desert to an uncomplaining Abram. Abram trusts that the Lord will provide, though his present dwelling on a tired and thirsty ground might indicate otherwise. Lot, however, becomes so attached to the pleasantries and luxuries of the good life in Sodom, that even when his and his family's lives are in jeopardy, angels themselves have to drag him away.

Rebecca DeYoung notes in her book *Glittering Vices*, “As with any

habit, [greed] depends on actions wearing a groove or pattern in the longings of our hearts.” Accustomed to the entrapments of a decadent lifestyle, Lot's attachments are not easily wrested free from his engrained habits of consumption.

Once it takes root in the human soul, greed prevents even an otherwise holy person from being free for the Lord. The rich young ruler in Luke 12 has indeed observed all other requirements for holiness according to the law. But when Jesus asks this impressively obedient person to disburden himself from his wealth and follow Christ, the strength of his attachment to his wealth prevents any movement toward Christ.

Karl Clifton-Soderstrom is an assistant professor of philosophy and the director of general education at North Park University in Chicago.

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These descriptions of greed are familiar to most of us, and we can all cite a memorable sermon, novel, movie, or fairy tale that warns of the dangers of excessive acquisitiveness and enslaved attachments to earthly goods that this vice often entails. What often gets left out in our descriptions of greed, however, is something that is both more subtle and more central to the experience of greed itself. Greed rests on a distorted disposition toward *time*. In this sense, greed is not simply a gluttonous excess, greed is the prideful attempt to seize the future for the sake of my present desires. Greed is the attempt to act as if history didn't take time.

In terms of contemporary economics, consider how many investments are actually attempts to cash in now, on speculations of some future event, financial success, or predicted economic growth indicator. This is the case not only with actual "futures" that people may buy, but also in those exotic hedge funds that consolidated real-estate investments, home mortgages, etc. Any form of credit in itself is basically means to make available in the present, something that I will not have until the future.

The recent crash of the real-estate market, and the ramifications of that crash for other investment markets, reminds us that the future can't so easily be brought into submission with our immediate desires. Try as we might, we cannot collapse the future into the present. My point is not to offer an economics lesson, but to indicate that much of our contemporary economy is so susceptible to greed because of a fundamental impatience operative within its consumption patterns.

We say that greed hoards, but

what is hoarding? Indeed, hoarding is a gathering of the world to the self, and thus is a manifestation of pride. Why hoard? We hoard because all of our desires impress an urgency upon us. Greed proclaims, "I want *now!*" Hoarding is accompanied by a pervasive anxiety over threats to one's possessions. Thus the greedy person is constantly fearful that what one possesses *now* will rot, rust, break, age, burn, depreciate, be stolen, deemed worthless, or in a word, die. The greedy person is the one who knows acutely that time moves on, that earthly goods fade away, that death awaits us all, and that our desires in this life cannot all be met. The greedy person knows all this, but despite this underlying knowledge, greed drives us to secure the finite goods of this world against the march of time. If we ask what is the most fundamental threat to one's possessions, it is time and mortality itself.

If greed distorts time by wanting all our desires to be met in the present moment, genuine Christian *hope* is the virtuous alternative. Hope engenders the proper posture toward God, by instilling in us a patient orientation

toward the word of promise that God will be faithful in the future. Hope not only calls us to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord in the eschaton, but calls us to be content within everyday life.

Consider, for example, Martin Luther's explanation of why we say "this day" and "daily" in the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us *this day* our *daily* bread." Luther cites two biblical passages, Proverbs 30:8-9 (a petition to be neither poor nor rich) and Matthew 6:34 (a command not to be anxious about tomorrow). He then comments, "These words teach us not to be greedy or wasteful or to worry about the future but to live contentedly in the confidence that the Lord will give us what we need."

Hope enables us to live *futurely*, stretched *eschatologically* into the promise that God will act in history *salvifically*, that God will provide the desires of our hearts, that grace will be received through the divine promise and not human efforts.

As joyously reassuring as it is to live in hope, however, we must remember that Christian hope does not function like optimism, reasonable expectation, or certainty. The problems with greed are many, but one of them is its frenzy to secure one's hoardings by a constant vigilance that attempts to eliminate all insecurity. In contrast, by relinquishing our own semblance of control of the future, hope retains a basic trembling toward the hiddenness of God's grace and the fulfillment of his promise.

It is no trite thing to hand over our futures to God's history, which is promised but not yet actualized. Hope that does not tremble is not

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For further reading

Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance, by John F. Kavanaugh

Greed, by Phyllis A. Tickle

Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church, by N.T. Wright

Theology of Hope, by Jürgen Moltmann

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genuine hope. In this sense, hope does not eliminate difficulties or persecutions, but rather, it *sustains us over time* through our present hardships toward a promised but hidden future. Abram's hope in that desolate land, as opposed to Lot's greed amidst luxury, did not end his difficulties immediately, but sustained him.

Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, someone intimately aware of the trials of enduring poverty, in answer to how he sustained the virtues of joy and hope during difficult times, said, "The theological virtue of hope is much more than optimism. Hope is based on the conviction that God is at work in our lives and in the world. Hope is ultimately a gift from God given to sustain us during difficult times."

Greed is a *timely* vice in that it attempts to gather not only the world to ourselves and our immediate desires, but to take control of a future for these selfish desires. Hope is a *timely* virtue, because it recognizes that history is the Lord's, and that God's promise of salvation will satisfy the desires of the human heart.

Luther offers these final words on the phrase, *the God of hope*: "What a wonderful title, the 'God of hope'! But this is the sign by which the apostle distinguishes between false gods and the true God. False gods are demons, gods of material things, because they possess those people who in their reliance on material things do not know how to hope. For he who relies on the true God, when all material things have been taken away, lives by pure hope alone... Our joy and peace do not consist in something material, but are beyond material things, in hope. Otherwise the God of hope would not give them, for he gives good things which are hidden, joy in sadness and personal affliction, peace in the midst of tumult and outward persecution. Persecution causes hope to abound." ■