

Avarice and Us

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On this cloudy, rainy Sunday morning, the first Sunday morning of summer, I suspect at least some of us have sun and sea on our minds. Some of us really love the sea, even if we do occasionally get seasick. We love that clean, vigorous sea air. We love the swell of the waves. We love the sunset over the far distant ocean horizon.

Now to really take in all these sensations, these wonderful sensations, we need to be out on the water. We need a boat. What sort of boat? A six-foot-long rowboat will not do. We can't go far out into the ocean, not safely, in a six-foot rowboat. We need something bigger, something twenty, maybe thirty feet long.

On a thirty-foot boat, we can have everything. A place to sleep, a place to eat, a deck to stretch out on. What more could anyone want—or need?

Some people today apparently need a good deal more. Shipyards in the United States, news reports tell us, are now doing a bang-up business building personal pleasure boats that run over 150 feet long. The industry calls these boats “megayachts.” Some of these megayachts go 300 feet, the length of a football field. The megayacht of Microsoft co-founder, Paul Allen, runs 414 feet long. Allen's boat,

the Octopus, has seven decks, a swimming pool, and a concert hall big enough to entertain 260 of Paul Allen's nearest and dearest friends.

Is 414 feet of megayacht enough to fully enjoy the sea? Unfortunately, no.

That's where Fort Lauderdale shipbuilder Tom Gonzales comes in. He specializes in what has become known as the “shadow boat.”

What do shadow boats do? They follow, or shadow, a megayacht. Why does a megayacht need a shadow? Because even a megayacht can't hold everything. Tom Gonzales actually owns a megayacht and a shadow boat of his very own. His shadow boat carries inside its hull, two motorcycles, a Hummer, four water scooters, a speedboat, and a yellow mini-submarine. And on the deck of his shadow: a helicopter and a Mini-Cooper car.

We can all understand, fairly readily I think, what brings people out to the sea in thirty-foot boats. But what brings people out to sea in 300-foot boats, with a shadow alongside? What gives people this lust for more when they already have enough?

Well, in the English language, we have a word for the lust for more when you already have enough. That word is greed.

Our world's greatest religious prophets, the historian Arnold Toynbee once observed, all profoundly disagree on many basic tenets of faith. But the great prophets all share the exact same perspective on greed. We court moral disaster, they all warn, whenever we make “material wealth

our paramount aim.” As Mahatma Gandhi advised: “There is enough wealth to meet everyone’s need, but not everyone’s greed.”

The great religions of our world all share, on greed, a broad and deep consensus. And herein, for us Americans, sits a paradox.

The paradox is this: Our world’s great religious traditions all rail against greed. Yet here in the United States, the most religiously observant nation in the developed world, greed seems to be thriving, even celebrated. Why? Is greed somehow hard-wired into the American character?

I don’t think so. Many of us here this morning have been around the block quite a few times. We’re old enough to remember the mid 20th century United States, a place where greedy behavior drew scorn, not smiles, where action that smacked of naked avarice brought condemnation, not eye-popping TV ratings. Back then, we lived in a significantly less greedy society. What has changed? What has happened, over the past fifty years, to make us, as a society, more greedy?

Here’s what has happened. We have become, as a society, more unequal. In the United States, over the past fifty years, we have witnessed the most colossal redistribution of income and wealth in modern world history, a redistribution that has concentrated at the top of our nation’s economic ladder an unholy share of our nation’s material bounty.

This is Sunday morning. This is not a time for statistics. But allow me, if you will, a slight dispensation. Let me share with you three quick numbers.

The most affluent one percent of Americans now hold more wealth than the bottom 90 percent of Americans combined—and not just more wealth, but over \$2.5 trillion more. We have not seen a gap this wide, between our most wealthy and everyone else, since 1929, right before the Great Depression. If we want to understand greed, I believe, we need to start with this gap. Many commentators on our contemporary scene, I recognize, dispute this connection between inequality and greed. Indeed, some commentators even see, in growing inequality, a redeeming social value. The grander the fortunes at a society’s summit, these commentators argue, the more incentive, for everyone, to work hard and become “successful.” We all, of course, want to be successful. But how should our society measure “success”?

In the United States today, we measure success by money—and the things that money can buy. If you have money, you are, ipso facto, successful. But money and things do not always constitute the ultimate measure of success. In fact, our human community has no all-purpose success measure, no single standard that applies across all epochs and all places.

In ancient Sparta, for instance, wealth didn’t bring success. Military prowess did. A century ago, in Latvia’s Jewish ghettos, the highest honors went to those who studied Torah most devotedly, not those who chased after fortune.

How we measure success, in short, varies by society. And what determines that variation? One factor more than any other: inequality. The more unequal a society, the more sheer wealth will determine success. Our wisest sages and

prophets have always understood this dynamic. And today our scholars have a sociological and psychological explanation.

These scholars point out that in relatively equal societies—in societies where most people make similar incomes—people will generally not obsess over things. If nearly everyone can afford much the same things, things overall will tend to lose their significance. Consequently, in a society where incomes and wealth are distributed somewhat equally, people are more likely to judge you by who you are, not what you own.

But inequality changes everything. The wider the gaps in income and wealth, the greater the differences in the things that different classes of people are able to afford. In markedly unequal societies, as a result, things take on greater significance. In these distinctly unequal societies, things signal who has succeeded and who has not. You are judged, in these societies, by what you own, by what you consume, not who you are. And that places great pressure on people like us, people who live in a deeply unequal society, to have the right things, because none of us want to be judged a failure.

So we end up on a treadmill that never seems to stop, working ever harder, going deeper into debt, trying to reach that consumption standard that defines the good life. But that good life, in a society growing ever more unequal, keeps getting harder to reach. The bar keeps rising—because the rich, as they become richer, keep raising the consumption standard. Not just a yacht, but a megayacht. Not just a megayacht, but a shadow boat, too.

The rich have little choice in all this. In an unequal society, they lust for more because they need more, to avoid “failure,” to stay successful.

Jesus never saw a shadow boat. But he feared greed. He did battle against it the best he could. We need to do our best. And if we are serious about doing our best, here early in the 21st century, we must do battle to narrow the gaps that divide us. This battle, we need to remember, has two fronts. On one front, the struggle against poverty, we as a society already stand committed. Whatever our faith, whatever our political coloration, we all want to see poverty erased from our land. But poverty, or the absence of wealth, only defines one end of the inequality spectrum. If wealth amasses at the top of a society at rates that far eclipse the wealth that builds at the bottom, then the gaps that divide us will widen even if the poor become less poor.

If we want these gaps to narrow, if we want to ensure less inequality, then the struggle against too little needs to be joined to a struggle against too much. In all things, in other words, moderation. In all things, moderation, even income and wealth. Especially income and wealth.

Many years ago, in 1822, an English cleric, the Reverend Charles Colton, made just this point. “Our incomes are like our shoes,” Rev. Colton told his congregation. “If too small, they gall and pinch us; but if too large, they cause us to stumble and trip.”

How can we today keep from stumbling? Two hundred years before Reverend Colton, another Englishman, Sir Francis Bacon, offered some wisdom that can still guide us,

if we let it. “Wealth is like manure,” Sir Francis Bacon noted. “It only does good when you spread it around.”

For a less greedy America, we need to start spreading.

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Author Sam Pizzigati edits *Too Much*, an online weekly on inequality and excess (www.toomuchonline.org) published by the Council on International and Public Affairs. His latest book, *Greed and Good: Understanding and Overcoming the Inequality That Limits Our Lives*, won “outstanding title” of the year honors this past January from the American Library Association Choice magazine.