THE FACE OF GREED
“America’s Disease is Greed”, Chicago Sun Times, 2004, by Andrew Greeley
Abbreviated:

The most serious spiritual problem in the country today is reckless and untrammeled greed. Greed caused the disgraceful corporate scandals that fill our newspapers. Greed is responsible for crooked cops and crooked politicians. … Greed has produced rash tax cuts that have given money to the rich and in effect taken it away from the poor. … Greed accounts for the efforts to take profitability out of the pensions and health insurance of working men and women. … Greed is responsible for the obscene salaries of CEOs. … Recent estimates put the current ratio at 500 to 1 -- the boss makes as much before lunch as the worker does all year. … Greed is responsible for the endless stress and ruthless competition of the workplace and the strains [on]… marriages. … Greed is the reason [the] poor … must fight the wars that the wealthy start.

Greed is the reason that the country is being run by the insurance, pharmaceutical, weapons and petroleum industries. Greed causes worldwide sex slavery of women and children. … Greed drives the murders of the narcotics world. …

The … Church speaks of four sins that cry to heaven for vengeance. Two are cheating workers out of wages and exploiting widows and children. Both happen every day in our greedy country.

Ambition is not evil within limits. The struggle for success is not bad within limits. Hard work and fair rewards are good within limits. It is not good to take from the poor and give to the rich, and that's exactly what this country is doing today.

Don’t let anyone tell you that lust is the most deadly of the deadly sins. [It is greed!]

It’s clear that this thing called greed is devastating at the social, as well as the individual level. But what is it exactly? Where does it come from, and what fuels it? Let’s start by…

DEFINING GREED

A dictionary definition:

Intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth, power, or food.

A social definition (From the Urban dictionary):

The defining characteristic of human nature. –The desire to own or control more resources than others. Greed is not merely “I want more.” Greed is “I want more than everybody else.” Thus the majority of people are forcibly kept poor because if everyone had a million dollars, a loaf of bread would cost a hundred grand.

This gives us a working definition to start with, but we’ll see that it is by no means complete. But starting with this, let’s move into the biology of greed...

The physiology and psychology of greed

Last week, we learned the brain is wired through nerve cells called neurons. An electrical current in the order of 80 millivolts shoots through a particular sequence of neurons, and that is the physical essence of our thoughts.
We also learned that deep in the brain lies the “reward” and “pleasure” center. When we are doing something the brain perceives as pleasurable, a chemical neurotransmitter, called “dopamine” ramps up the firing of the neurons right to the pleasure center.

You and I have seen this in action, and most likely experienced it ourselves. —You know that reaction of a child when they’ve opened a really good Christmas present? —Dopamine release! How about when you’ve pulled off a really good buy on an item you’ve wanted? —Dopamine hit! Or perhaps a sense of satisfaction after helping someone, or even the first kiss of that person you love; dopamine release to the reward/pleasure center.

The stimulating of the “reward center” of our brains is neither good nor bad in itself. It all comes down to the practices and priorities we develop to fire it. Greed, like sexual desire is a natural desire that has been driven off balance by our fallen natures, and our particular weaknesses.

Greed drives the needs or perceived needs of the person to toxic levels. Ambition, physical welfare, self-esteem, and the such; they are good things; unless they are out of balance.

I want you to watch this closely and discern with me, the physiology of greed.

Here is PERSON X; normally a very nice person, they have a problem with greed. I am the “reward center” of PERSON X’s brain. When I light up, the “reward center” is abuzz with the synaptic firing we’ve been talking about. PERSON Y is “lady luck.” When she hands a gift to PERSON X, that is another item that PERSON X has managed to acquire. …So let’s send a bit of good luck PERSON X’s way. [Light comes on as PERSON X receives the gift, then goes out shortly afterward.]

-So, my esteemed colleagues; did you determine when the brain was stimulated?

That has a profound implication, doesn’t it: **The “high” for greed is not primarily in ownership, but in the act of acquisition.** —Now consider the implications of that!!

There is a fascinating article called, “Greed: The Ultimate Addiction”, by Leon F. Seltzer. He points out two dynamics studying the greed of certain business tycoons. He draws this insight from his research:

**Chasing every financial opportunity—and, it cannot be overemphasized, to the detriment of virtually everything else in their life**—has become their be-all and end-all. For that, frankly, is where the dopamine is… And the “end” for them is simply the high (or dopamine release) they receive each time they do a deal, turn a profit, or make a “killing.” And just like other addicts, over time (because of the related phenomena of tolerance and dependency) they’ll need to make bigger and bigger “killings” to get the ego gratification they require in order to feel good about themselves.

He then bridges that into the psychological side:

To them luxuries (“my Ferrari…my yacht…my estate…my penthouse…”) are necessities. They all make them look good—and appearances are one of their foremost considerations. For material acquisitions can wondrously mask (both from others and from themselves) woeful deficits in their core self-image.

Like other lethal traits of human nature, it’s mind-blowing how this same trait can affect lives in completely opposite ways. In the case of the greedy business tycoon, acquiring and holding wealth is the high. —Even to the expense of everyone else; they just become richer and richer (fatter and fatter).

On the other hand, there are those who buy incessantly- the thrill is in the shopping, the high is in acquiring the goods, not forcing the deal. They do it despite the debt; instead of becoming richer, they become poorer. So, even though the physical result is the opposite, it is merely the flip side of the same coin; the same temptation-indulged.
When we look at the brain chemistry, and the psychology, the physical side of it; we begin to see why people will go to such lengths to acquire possessions; it might be material items, or education, accomplishments, relationships, or some variation. —We chase it, then quickly tire of it and suffer the same emptiness over and over again. Then we move on to the next “high.”

Gratifying one’s self is addictive. —And when we become addicted; we have a name for it: GREED.

All of these factors lead us to...

The Spiritual Definition of Greed
Greed is the ultimate idolatry because it worships the one false god that everybody loves; self. We will go to any lengths to lay our latest acquisitions at the bottomless altar of self; and then run off with a religious zeal to acquire yet more.

Greed may well be the deadliest of all temptations and here is why:

The danger is always there~
Need and desire comes in so many wrappings! A person can develop a hunger for limitless things; power, food, wealth, hobbies, friends, status; the list goes on and on. It is possible for any of them to get out of balance, and before we know it; our need has become greed.

This is especially important for us to note. Greed is often portrayed as the “rich man’s disease”, but the truth is; everyone is vulnerable. Just take a strong enough desire, good or bad; mix it with enough self-interest and you can produce the nature of greed in any human heart.

Greed is insatiable~
The “high” in greed comes from the act of getting. So there can never be enough. In fact, as time goes on; greed, by its very dynamics will demand more and more; not less. That means: The allure is intense, transient and personal; however, the damage is widespread and long-term.

Greed is not -wrong desire, just twisted desire~
That means it is easily rationalized~ The electronics and car industries count on this. Every year that car, or computer is a little slicker, faster, and easier to use. Given time, we find reasons we should get the newest one. Just see how long the lines are when the next iphone or Xbox comes out!

It is the gateway sin~
If by definition, greed wants what others have; it is the doorway to envy, adultery, robbery, and even murder. In fact, greed is more than a “gateway,” it is a “floodgate” for every other kind of evil.

Now, with a grasp on the physical, psychological, and spiritual side of greed; I want you to listen to this Biblical account as if you are hearing it for the first time:

A Biblical Lesson in Greed
And, look you, a man came to him and said, "Teacher, what good thing am I to do to possess eternal life?" He said to him, "Why do you ask me about the good? There is One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "What kind of commandments?" Jesus said, "You must not kill; you must not commit adultery; you must not steal; honor your father and your mother.' And, 'You must love your neighbor as yourself.'" The young man said, "I have observed all these things. What am I still lacking?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me!"
When the young man heard that saying, he went away in sorrow, for he had many possessions. 

Matt. 19:16-22
“Here is a good person. He has wealth, but he manages it with a strong moral code. He seeks to be right with God. He even asks God face to face, “What must I do?”

So how is greed, the monster here?

Let’s dig out a few clues, listening to the man’s own language. There are little give-away words like: “do”; “possess”; and “lacking.”

We now know: Greed is the “high” in acquiring. This man is a great illustration that it isn’t simply acquiring wealth. He was into acquiring religious accomplishments. His identity was tied up in the possessions, but his “dopamine high” came from acquiring religious accomplishments he had done.

And yet, for all his religious bragging rights; something drove him to Jesus; it was that unshakable sense he was “lacking” something. His routine, the neural pathways in his head were so set on acquiring religious kudos, that even face to face with God, he could only ask the same old question: what new accomplishment must I acquire? Will THAT stop this sense of lacking?

Jesus plays along and gives a few actions. The young man says, “Done it! Got the T-shirt.” Jesus then hits him with the bombshell: sell everything; follow me. What’s going on here?

He is breaking the cycle of greed:
~First; get your sense of identity from something other than possessions. Shatter that false ego.
~Second; Jesus turns the focus from acquiring by changing the solution from what you DO; to what you ARE. You DO accomplishments; but the treasure of heaven is in what you ARE. The treasures of heaven are in being: saved, filled with the fruit of the Spirit; holy, humble, friends with God, a child of God, heirs with Christ; this is what you ARE. –

So how does one become those things? It’s simple yet profound: Follow Christ.

The young man had a choice: GREED or CHRIST. It couldn’t be both. And even though he was a respectable man, a man with potential, and a man who was seeking Christ; he still had to choose between his TEMPTATION or his CHRIST. He was so close; and yet he lost Christ. It’s not surprising that the disciples were discouraged, “Who then can be saved!”

The clue was in the remark of Jesus. "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Matt 19:24

As a means of defense, there used to be a small door next to the public gates in the ancient city walls. The reason being, if there was not a guard to open the big gate, a man could come in the smaller door which was called an “eye.” It was so small though, that he’d have to stoop down to pass through. There would be no room for his possessions, no weapons, and definitely, not a large animal like a camel; only him or her.

~If your identity was tied up in your possessions, you’d have to “check them at the door.” If you got your “highs” from acquiring things; you’d have to find something else to fire your neurons. If you were entering the holy city to find Jesus, the cycle of greed would have to stay outside. But if you are willing to come in and follow; God will give you something else to fire that “reward center” in your brain. With God all things are possible.

The essence of GREED is simply pandering to the little god of self; and it comes so naturally to us. Choosing to follow Christ over temptation isn’t a one-time decision; or a decision in only one context of your life. It is every day, and in every area of desire. –Not that following Christ removes all human desire; that wouldn’t be living. But it is a guarantee to this: if we are following, our desires will be healthy, balanced, and leading us to ETERNAL good. But it is a choice; a continual choice.

So how you doing with this temptation? Is there a “greed” you need to take from the god of self and lay at the feet of Christ?