

A Bible Study Guide

for

The Report of the Greed Line Study Group of the World Council of Churches

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Part I. The Greed Line – The Difference between the Tombraider and the Tombdweller

Angelina Jolie's character in the Lara Croft movies embodies the beauty, fullness, and triumph of a human being. Lara is an archaeologist and an adventurer, a powerful and liberated woman who makes her own choices and can defend herself against any adversary, and a champion who always gets what she wants. In real life, Angelina is not very different. She is an Ambassador of Goodwill for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and has adopted three children from conflict-ridden places: Maddox was originally from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Zahara is from Ethiopia and Pax Thien is from Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam. She has three biological children as well: Shiloh, Knox and Vivienne. Her marriage to Brad Pitt, also a highly celebrated actor, received unprecedented media hype. As both are highly successful, they have three multi-million dollar homes in Los Angeles, France and Italy. Angelina Jolie, the actress, and Lara Croft, 'the tombrider,' embody wealth and success. Then and now, such human triumph is rare. What is common is the exact opposite – 'the tombdweller.'

In the Philippines, according to a documentary shown a few years ago, there are over 6,000 tomb dwellers in public cemeteries. I am sure there are more now. They are the poorest of the poor, who like Jesus at his birth, found no place among the people. Jesus was born in a manger where animals lived. The poorest among the Filipino People live among the dead. In Luke 8: 26-39, we also encounter a tombdweller. The narrative describes how a man with an 'unclean spirit' lives apart from his community and family and lived among the tombs. For centuries, the tomb-dweller has been understood as one who is sinful and has been demon-possessed. Today, the tombdweller has been possessed by a different demon. A demon we call 'greed.' Specifically, the greed of the empire. The greed of the empire treats human beings as possessions and not as human beings. Jesus himself critiqued greed and empire. When he preached 'the Kingdom of God,' he was critiquing the Kingdom of Rome or the Roman Empire.

The Report of the Greed Line Study Group of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is a concrete effort at addressing greed. The paper in its background and rationale reads,

"The mounting ecumenical concern over greed is in response to the 'signs of the times' – that is: the intertwined economic and ecological crises rooted in greed that are threatening the wellbeing and potentially the very survival of humanity and many living creatures. Moreover, it ensues from the faith-based imperative to pursue God's preferential option for the poor and vision of fullness of life for all, which must be at the heart of the churches' engagement for justice in the economy and in the Earth."

“The WCC (2009) raised the alarm over how ‘greed has become the basis for economic growth in the present era.’ Yet even before financial markets unravelled in 2008-2009, greed had been manifesting itself in the global economic system in terms of widening income inequality among and within countries.”

In the Luke 8, Jesus said to the unclean spirit inside the man, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” According to several Bible commentaries, a Roman legion was made up of 6,000 men. They embodied Rome's control and power over Judea. They were mostly citizens of Rome who served in an occupied territory where they functioned as a military force to ensure that the Roman Emperor was obeyed and followed. Legion and empire are words associated with violence and oppression. Legion and empire feed on greed.

The most successful businesses have the most oppressive labor practices. While billionaires get richer, billions of overseas Filipino workers and local workers are paid slave wages, endure punishing work hours and inhumane working conditions. How many of them truly enjoy the fruits of their labor? Transnational mining companies have poisoned our lakes and rivers, made wastelands of our fields and forests, displaced communities and sacrificed the future of the generations that will follow. What kind of world do we leave to our children? Western theologies which promote individualism and prosperity validate competition and champions so that the weak and the oppressed are pushed farther and farther into the margins. Have our churches really followed the Christ who wanted to feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty? Legion and empire are organizations and systems that possess people's lives so that their own bodies are no longer theirs.

The tombdweller, in his healing, named his demon 'legion.' Legion, empire, global capitalism, and greed, they are all the same. By exposing empire and critiquing it, there is a whole system that is disturbed. Some people want the empire to remain because they benefit from it. Some people think their only salvation is in the empire. Some people don't even know it but they are victims of the empire. Because the empire is so powerful, some people cannot imagine a world beyond it. But Jesus could. He called it the "Kingdom of God." Then and now, greed and empire is the cause of suffering in the world.

The Report of the Greed Line Study Group quotes Harry De Lange and Bob Goudzwaard (1995) in *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Care*:

“Only by defining the upper limits of consumption and thus of income for the rich can the real needs of the poor be satisfied and the impact of the economy on the environment be brought under control.”

For centuries, Christianity and churches have talked about "Jesus' option for the poor." The challenges today require us to do more. We are compelled to ask who and what causes the poor to be poor? Thus, we seek to define the greed line.

Some suggested questions for reflection and discussion

- How is greed evident in your community or society?

- Who are the tombdwellers in your community?
- Who are the victims of greed and empire in your context?
- When is wealth 'excessive' or abusive?

A Responsive Affirmation

We believe in God who is love and who has created and given the earth and the universe to all people.

We don't believe in the right of the rich and strongest who alienate people in their own Motherland.

We believe in Jesus Christ who came to heal us and free us from all forms of oppression.

We do not believe in the powers that leave the poorest of the poor, the vulnerable and the weakest wounded and bleeding.

We believe in the Holy Spirit who works in and through all who are turned towards the truth.

We do not believe in the justification of poverty, hunger, discrimination, peace through war, globalization, consumerism and religious fundamentalism.

We believe in the community of faith which is called to proclaim the love of God and service to all people and creation.

We do not believe in all that are root causes of division (racism, casteism, gender, color discrimination and other divisive forces)

We believe in the reign of God, in Jesus's promise of Immanuel, and the ultimate end of all evil powers.

Part II. What is Greed? – David and Dynasty

Greed as Desire and Violation of Limits

Violence, wars, state terrorism, martial rule and political killings are not new occurrences. Before the ideology called globalization used market and military to manipulate and control weaker nations, before the British, American and Spanish empires colonized nations and traded their Bibles for the land of the native people, and before Christendom divided the world between good and evil, Christian and non-Christian — the greatest king of Israel wrested power from the hands of Moses' tribes into the hands of his family to establish the Dynasty of David. II Samuel 11 is about the "dark side" of David. It is about how the 'greatest' king of Israel rapes Bathsheba. Chapter 13 of the same book tells of another rape, an incestuous rape. Amnon, David's heir to the throne, raped his half-sister, Tamar. The rape of Bathsheba and Tamar compels us to face the painful reality that the weak do not always find protection and mercy from the powerful.

There are many texts which can be used to dissect greed but David and his dynasty gives us a more compelling example of greed "as desire and violation of limits" and "self-interest and pursuit of wealth." When Nathan, the prophet, told David that there was a rich man who killed the only lamb a poorer man had, even when he had so many cattle and sheep, David was so angry about the injustice that he ordered the death of this man. Only to find out that he was 'that man.' Why does a king want another man's wife when he already had so many wives? Because as the king, he could have any woman he wanted. He was the king. Even Nathan likened David's rape of Bathsheba to the possession of a sheep of another man when he already had so many sheep.

In the Report of the Greed Line Study Group, Konrad Raiser (2014) expresses greed as “the desire to have more than one’s legitimate share of material goods and power.” Moreover, “greed is about wants which are “difficult to contain” and involve an “emotional energy that seeks to transgress or disregard limitations” and which are consequently difficult to circumscribe and measure.”

The Report of the Greed Line Study Group clarifies the difference between greed and self-interest:

“Self-interest, necessary for human well-being, does not necessarily constitute greed. Insofar as humans can survive and flourish only together with one another, self-interest naturally includes the interests of others. Therefore, when self-interest is pursued without compassion for others, when interconnectedness is disregarded or when the mutuality of all humanity is forgotten, greed results.”

Structural Greed and a Culture of Greed

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, critiques the dynasty of David, saying that this king ‘paganized’ Israel and inverted everything that Moses and the Israelite people fought for. In the Exodus story, the Hebrew people escaped from slavery to create an alternative community where each of them was accountable for the quality of life of the other. In David’s monarchy and dynasty, a new kind of tyranny oppressed the people. And like any empire, David’s monarchy was not content in ruling over one nation. Like other kingdoms, David wanted to expand his empire. However, this was not David’s greatest sin. In the creation of a dynasty and in building a temple for God, he ‘owned’ God. No longer was God to be worshipped in the mountains; no longer did God lead the people through a cloud of fire. The acts of God were limited to one bloodline and God was contained in one place, the temple. David’s greatest sin was to claim that his dynasty embodied God. That is structural greed and a culture of greed.

In July 2013, the Napoles Scam exposed the complexity of greed and complicity of those in the Philippine Government who enriched themselves at the expense of the masses who lived in abject poverty. The Napoles Scam is just part of the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) of the government, also known as the ‘Pork Barrel.’ In 2013, every senator had discretionary funds amounting to over PhP 200 million and every representative was allocated PhP 70 million. Put together, these amounted to PhP 25 billion in lump-sum discretionary funds which were hidden from public scrutiny. Not only did they cultivate corruption among the ranks, from the highest officer to the lowliest clerk, and political patronage, further investigation revealed non-existent and sub-standard infrastructure projects as well as ghost scholars and charity recipients. Like any system that feeds on greed and corruption, the one at the top is most culpable of all. The ‘Presidential Pork’ under the innocuous name ‘Disbursement Acceleration Program’ (DAP) amounts to PhP 1.3 trillion and is over 55% of the National Budget. Again, this is a lump-sum discretionary fund for spending by the President’s Office. Declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the Philippines, the President, Benigno Simeon Aquino, protested that the magistrates were denying the people access to basic services. The Senate and Congress are legislative bodies. The Office of the President executes the laws enacted by the Senate and Congress. Both

branches of the government, the executive and legislative, conspired to control vast amounts of the government's money which came from people's taxes by making them discretionary funds, cultivated a system to amass wealth in seemingly legitimate ways, and perpetrated their political power by entrenching political patronage. The clamor of the Filipino People has been to scrap both the PDAF and DAP and prosecute all who are accountable for what can be described as structural greed.

In the Report of the Greed Line Study Group, Konrad Raiser (2014) describes structural greed as “the institutional arrangement aiming at the excessive accumulation of goods, means (especially capital) and power which results in structural deprivation of the conditions of life in dignity for the majority of people.” While such structures are shaped and directed by persons with accountability for their actions and ambitions, structural greed may function independently of individual greedy intentions and is therefore difficult to attribute to a single person or institution.

The report also points out that structural greed often works in tandem with a culture of greed that shapes collective thinking and behavior. A culture of greed “refers to the set of values, symbolic representations and collective norms which lend legitimacy to a structural framework centred on the relentless accumulation of material goods, capital and power.”

The rape crimes of David and Amnon were to become a pattern wherein those in power perpetrate violence against their own people because of greed. The violation of limits, structural greed and a culture of greed are all attributes of empires and dynasties. They must be critiqued, exposed and dismantled even as they proclaim that they are, like David, ‘anointed.’

Suggested questions for reflection and discussion

- What government structures, economic and political policies evidently allow the violation of limits which cultivate greed?
- How were these government structures, economic and political policies put in place?
- How is the culture of greed evident in your organization and society?
- What is your personal response when you are confronted with this?
- What are the peoples' response to structural greed and the culture of greed in your context?

A Litany of Resistance against Greed

For every student who is educated in a premier university where he or she is made to believe that financial success is more important than the common good, there are hundreds of un-schooled children who labor as early as five years old just to put food on the table.

For every corporation that earns billions in profit in a global community, there are villages and homes where men, women and children toil day and night, in fear and in inhumane working conditions for slave wages.

For every government that exhibits power to ensure the interests of capitalists and foreign investors, there is a mother searching for an abducted daughter or son, children whose

father or mother is murdered to be silenced and to instill fear, and an entire community that flees to escape militarization.

For every mining company that extracts minerals and wealth from the earth to sustain our wasteful consumption, there are indigenous peoples and farming communities who lose their homes, their clean water, their land to till, and witness how their paradise becomes a wasteland.

For every woman who indulges in luxuries and vanities to fulfill the image the powerful have created, there are a hundred women who struggle with blood, sweat and tears to birth a new world where women are truly whole.

For every human being who remains silent in the suffering of their fellow human beings, a woman will die in childbirth, a child will stop going to school even before he learns to read, and a father will feel helpless in the face of his children's hunger.

In spite of the many religions that the so-called faithful are ready to defend and die for, we live in communities and societies where those who need God the most seem to be unheard, unseen and are dying. The true measure of our humanity and spirituality is not how much we say we love God but how much we express love to those who truly need to experience the love of God.

Part III: Why is Greed Pervasive? – Joseph and the Hungry People

“Greed is Good”

Genesis 41: 55 reads, “When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph....Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians ...all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe in all the world.” In the text, it is evident that Joseph has control and monopoly over the supply of grain. When the Egyptians cried in their hunger, Joseph sold rice to them. He SOLD rice to them. I wonder how many could afford to buy Joseph’s grain and how many died of hunger because they could not afford Joseph’s grain. But what is also explicit in the text is that Joseph was selling to both the Egyptians and the non-Egyptians. There was no mercy even for the people of Egypt. Joseph and the Pharaoh were making a profit even as communities and peoples were dying of hunger.

Genesis 41: 49 reads, “Joseph had stored grain in such abundance, like the sand of the sea - that he stopped measuring it: it was beyond measure.” He and Pharaoh had the power and resources to feed peoples and nations. And yet they chose not to. Fuelled by greed and profit, the powerful men sacrificed peoples and nations.

Isn't it incredible that more than half of the world's population experiences hunger on a daily basis and communities engage in wars over basic resources such as water, food and land even as producers harvest bumper crops and oil companies earn billions of dollars? Isn't it incredible that the Philippines has a great number of some of the grandest and most expensive malls in Asia while hundreds of thousands of families live in houses made of trash or are forced to live in the streets? Isn't it incredible that there is so much evidence of

affluence and profit as much as there is evidence of human suffering and deprivation? This is how our economic system works today.

The study guide elaborates on the validation of greed in our times:

"The mantra that "greed is good" and the notion that unlimited wealth accumulation brings happiness have, in recent decades, become familiar and popular. While greed has of course existed since time immemorial, there is much more tolerance, even approval of it, in present times, representing a stark shift in moral and cultural thinking that is linked to the neoliberal revolution that has occurred over the last three decades. Today, greed appears to have become officially sanctioned and entrenched in our economic systems – the intrinsic goals of which are to grow limitlessly, to generate the highest possible returns in the shortest time frame and to maximise utility or pleasure from the consumption of material goods. At the same time, neoliberal assumptions about the inherent selfishness and greediness of human beings – assumptions that have been widely transmitted through media, education and government policies – are now, in the words of Robert Merton (1968), more likely to 'self-fulfil.'"

Suggestions questions for reflection or discussion (as stated in the Report of the Greed Line Study Group)

- Is capitalism the structural expression of a culture of greed?
- Can capitalism with its need for expansion and continuous growth endure without greed? Or is it endemic and habitual greed that produces and enables this type of economic order to operate and thrive?
- Is it possible to devise a form of capitalism that integrates a consciousness of critical ceilings and expresses this in the form of structural regulations rather than simply appealing to individual restraint?

Individualism and a spirituality of consumption

Before the famine, when the harvest was abundant and Joseph was blessed with two sons, he says and it reads in Genesis 41: 51, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house..." In a land of plenty where his dreams seemingly came true, Joseph forgot his brothers, his family, and his own people. He denied the reality that he was still a slave. Even as Joseph continued to be a victim of the empire of Pharaoh, Joseph also victimized others for the benefit of the empire of Pharaoh. So much so that he forsakes his own people, even his own brothers. In Genesis 42, when he encounters his brothers who travelled from Canaan to Egypt in search of food, he gives them the harshest treatment of all. While he was ready to sell grain to all Egyptians and peoples of other nations, he accused his own brothers of being spies. In response to their supplication to be allowed to buy food for their families, Joseph imprisons them and tests them until he is satisfied. He may have had reason to distrust them but they were still his brothers and his own people. His abuse of power and authority and his desire to present himself as affluent and sufficient separated him from his own brothers.

The Report of the Greed Line Study Group expounds on this:

“(G)reed results from “the human propensity to focus the longing and the search for a meaningful life and for well-being on ‘having,’ on property, possessions and on the power to accumulate the means of life.” However, the radical individualism promoted by capitalism “denies the dependency of life on relationships in community and therefore can never get enough in its search for life and well-being.”

We have looked at Joseph’s response to the people’s hunger and the loss of his identity, but to truly understand his story and where greed comes from, we have to look at his youth. This is what he says to his brothers about his dreams, “There we were, binding sheaves in the fields. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bow down to my sheaf” (Genesis 37: 7). He also said, “the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (Genesis 37: 9). In his dreams, he had power and authority over his brothers, his mother and even his father. Joseph was seventeen years old when he shared his dreams with his family. He was the second to the youngest son and he had ten older brothers. His dreams as a youth reveal to us what is at the very heart of greed. Greed comes from the belief that we are better and must be dominant over everyone else.

In the Report of the Greed Line Study Group, Jung Mo Sung (2014) observes:

“People desire more than they need or more than their fair share because they want, through this accumulation, to be more than others. They want to win in the rivalry of mimetic desire. They wish to be recognised as being more than others. In capitalism, this desire is nourished by ‘consumption spirituality.’ And this ‘consumption spirituality’ is the spirit that moves people to look for more success and efficiency within the system.”

Meanwhile, the spirituality of consumption – or the spiritual experience connected to the act of consuming – fuels the dynamics of capitalism. In the current market society, goods have become nothing less than icons of self-realization and happiness. According to Jung Mo Sung (2014):

“Today the economy – both the pursuit of unlimited wealth accumulation and of unlimited consumption – is related to deeper, spiritual questions. It has to do with the deepest meaning of life and the quest for personal fulfilment and happiness...What we are calling ‘greed’ is regarded as perseverance in the pursuit of complete self-fulfilment.”

Suggested questions for reflection and discussion

- Are we vulnerable? How do we feel about the vulnerable in our midst?
- How do we feel about the rich? Do we desire to become rich?
- What is the source of our happiness? What gives meaning to our lives? What uplifts our spirit?
- How do we deny a consumption spirituality?

A Declaration of Life

If I can write myself into being

I would be born to a land where no one weeps and despairs

I will be nurtured and loved by a community whether I am male or female

I could speak, dance and sing – my own thoughts, my own rhythm, my own song
I would be safe when I walk on a narrow road, and journey on my own
I will not be afraid whether I am beautiful or ordinary for I know I have my own gifts
I will live a long and joyful life, and know truly who I am and what I seek

If I can write my people into being
We would never be slaves again and all people would be truly free
We would raise our voices and walk the streets at every injustice, and demand truth and integrity
We will find that all children have safe homes and have enough food to eat
Where all can find rest and sleep at night, and rise up in the morning with hope and dignity
Where farmers could plant and fisher folk can fish and taste the fruits of the land and sea
Where governments do not care to profit but will seek the good for all creatures and humanity

If I can write peace into being
It will be a time that will come not tomorrow, but today
It will be as the common people imagined, a time of plenty for not a few but for all
A place where there is equality: water for all who thirst, healing for all who are broken
A shelter, a sanctuary for everybody, where no bullet can be heard and no curse is spoken
A peace that creates circles of compassion. A peace that seeks justice for the oppressed.
A peace that is built by prayers and action. The peace that the prophets professed.