

“Ambition and Greed”

from Leo Tolstoy’s Short Story “How much land does a man need?”

By Yunbo Gu

“What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life?” The questions come from Matthew 16:26 in the Bible. Today, there remains a hot debate on ambition and greed. Some people interpret that ambition is a desire or drive to succeed without causing damage or loss to others while greed is something that drives people to misuse someone or take from someone to achieve their interests and profits. They think that ambition fuels people to work hard, to surpass their own limits and to overcome any difficulty to succeed. People mistake ambition for greed because they like mediocrity and are too afraid to take any risk that ambition brings them. On the other hand, others believe that there is no noticeable difference between ambition and greed because the primitive good ambition ends up becoming greed due to human nature - greed for wealth, power and fame. Which point of view is right? Maybe we can find some answers from Leo Tolstoy’s short story – “How much land does a man need?” This story is about Pakhom, a Russian peasant, who worked so hard to survive, but he failed because he was a serf. At that point, he realized that he should acquire more land. He said, “Our only trouble is that we haven’t land enough. If I had plenty of land, I shouldn’t fear the Devil himself!” The Devil was pleased to hear that. He thought, “All right, we will have a tussle. I’ll give you land enough; and by means of that land I will get you into my power.” Since then, the Devil utilized Pakhom’s desire for land to allure him to want more and better land. Fueled by his dissatisfaction with what he had and excessive desire for more land, he ignored his nightmare, which foreshadowed his death. He still said to himself, “An hour to suffer, a life-time to live.” He was told to get as much land as he could go round on his feet in a day, but he had to come back to the starting point before the sunset. Before the sunset, he drained all his energy and was too exhausted to be able to move. He thought, “there is plenty of land, but will God let me live on it? I have lost my life! I have lost my life! I shall never reach that spot.” When he reached the place where he started, he died of the strain. His servant picked up a spade and dug a grave long enough for him to bury in. Eventually, “six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.” This didactic literature shows how the excessive human ambition destroys a person.

First of all, do you think that your possession of material wealth can keep yourself away from financial anxiety and fear? Some people believe that earthly wealth can bring them security and pleasure while others think that people have lost sight of the real purpose of living when they become slaves of money. Look at what this story tells us about it. Pakhom said, “If I had plenty of land, I shouldn’t fear the devil himself.” He thought that he would be free from anxiety and fear if he had more wealth. Therefore, he pursued for more land to secure his life.

However, after he obtained more land, a passing dealer happened to stop by him and told him that he just purchased thirteen thousand acres of fertile land for 1000 rubles. Pakhom thought, "with my one thousand rubles, why should I get only thirteen hundred acres, and saddle myself with a debt besides. If I take it out there, I can get more than ten times as much for the money." He still barely felt safe. Thus, he left his wife and family and started on his journey with his man. Eventually, he got a big good deal – thousands of acres of land, but he died of draining all his energy from the endless pursuit of more land. Ironically, he could not enjoy what he had because his greed had overtaken him. In today's world, there are many Pakhoms who think they will be safe if they have enough money. Such a life mindset drives them to work so hard that they unconsciously sacrifice their families, their happiness and even their lives to earning more money. One day when they are dying, they realize nothing can buy their lives back. They cannot take all their possessions to another world. Thus, without life, safety means nothing.

Secondly, do you think people can resist variety of temptations, such as money, power, fame and even lust? Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist anything except temptation." Some people agree with him because they believe that people are sinners, who are selfish, greedy, vanity and indulging. In the story, the devil symbolized temptation. He managed to manipulate Pakhom's strong desire to be rich and his discontent with what he had to fuel his greed by appearing in the guise of the peasant and the dealer. For example, the devil pretended to be a peasant, who happened to meet Pokhom and told him that he just came from a village where the land was so good that rye sown on it grew as high as a horse." Then Pokhom thought, "Why should I suffer in this narrow hole, if one can live so well elsewhere? In this crowded place one is always having trouble. But I must first go and find out all about it myself." This shows that he was not content with what he had and his greed was fueled. The devil often utilizes human's discontentment and greed to get them into his power. When he was dying of the attempt to grasp as much land as possible, Pakhom regretfully said, "there is a plenty of land, but will God let me live on it? I have lost my life, I have lost my life!" After he died, his man picked up a spade and dug a grave long enough to for Pakhom to be buried in. Six feet from his head to his heels were what he needed. This tragic story tells us that the sacrifice of basic human kindness, mercy, love, honesty and trust and the surrender of responsibilities for the acquisition of possessions bring a man earthly ruin and eternal damnation. Death is the consequence of greed. Some people may not be aware of it or even they think it is the exaggerated statement. When people face death, they realize nothing is more important than life. From this story, it is also learned that temptation is powerful because we have emptiness within us and we long to fill it and we cannot defeat it because we are discontent with what we have and are jealous of other people having more than we do. We are always tempted by many things, like wealth, power, fame, vanity, lust. How can we overcome them? We need faith, love and family.

Finally, do you think that suffering for a short time is worthwhile if you can enjoy life for a long time afterward? Today's world is more competitive and challenging than before and also more cruel and realistic, so people have to work much harder to be successful in a society. Thus,

some people become cynical social climbers and even use all means to climb up to the top of a society. They are willing to sacrifice their youth to gaining high status, wealth and fame. They thought when they got there, they could enjoy all amount of prestige for the rest of their lives. In a relentless clamber to the top, even to their own detriment, they strived to go up without any regret at all, like Pakhom, who said, "an hour to suffer, a life-time to live". In fact, when he was facing death, it occurred to him that he could not enjoy what he had any more. He had to leave all his possessions in this world for another world, just like his bringing nothing when he came to this earth. He struggled to pursue for more land in life, but he actually needed a piece of land enough to be able to be buried in. This simple principle is not easy to be accepted when people are healthy, wealthy and noteworthy. Everyone has one life. How to live this life is a must question.

In conclusion, this topic of "Ambition and Greed" is very common, but it is still worth discussing about. Leo Tolstoy told us that Pakhom was a victim of his own greed, which obscured his judgement so that he could hardly recognize the temptation of the devil behind his opportunities. We must have ambition, but do not let it turn into greed. Confucius said, "Good people are generous without being wasteful; they are hard-working without being resentful; they desire without being greedy; they are at ease without being haughty; they are dignified without being fierce."