

The Endless Greed

Haroon Rashid, the Abbasid Caliph, once expressed to his courtiers his keen desire to meet and interview a person who had personally seen the Prophet Of Islam. A courtier suggested a name of someone resident in Yemen but added that he was too old to travel from so far away to Baghdad. Being too anxious to meet the old man, Haroon insisted that a special arrangement be made to bring him to his court.

A special stretcher laden with a soft cotton bedding was sent to the house of the old man in Yemen and comfortably carried, he was brought to Baghdad. On arrival, Haroon welcomed him in his court with due respect. He asked him whether he had met the Prophet in person and he nodded in affirmative. On being asked to describe his features, he said the Prophet was of exceedingly impressive shape with black eyes and curly hair. He added that the Prophet was very fond of perfumes, and wherever he passed, the sweet fragrance emanating from him remained behind for quite a long time.

The Caliph then asked the old man whether he remembered and could relate any saying of the Prophet. He replied that there was one he remembered in which the Prophet had said "Man grows old but two things remain young (active) in him. They are greed and extended hopes".

Satisfied with the interview, the Caliph then presented the old man with handsome gifts in cash and kind and gave instructions that he be carried back comfortably to his home in Yemen. The stretcher carrying the old man was already out of Baghdad on way to Yemen when he suddenly raised his voice pleading to the bearers to take him again to the Caliph as had an important matter yet to discuss with him. On arrival again in the court, he inquired from the Caliph whether the gifts he had so lavishly presented to him were once for all or whether he should expect to be invited to receive again every year. This question made the Caliph laugh and he responded saying that indeed what the Prophet had mentioned that the instincts of greed and extended hopes do not diminish with the growing of age, is absolutely true.

On receipt of assurance from the Caliph of repeated gifts, the old man departed on his stretcher to return to his home in Yemen. But before arrival home, he died on the way before he could enjoy anything from the gifts he was carrying and which he dearly cherished.

That the instinct of greed is inherent in human nature and does not diminish with age is worth noting from the abovementioned conversation between Caliph Haroon and the old man. The Holy Qur'an also makes reference to this human instinct and says: "Verily Man is created avarious (greedy)" (Surah Ma'arij, v. 19). We witness this instinct in a small child as it creeps about the house coveting for everything which to which its attention is drawn. Not only that, but once successful in laying it hand on something, it immediately puts it into its mouth perhaps to enjoy it irrespective of whether it was palatable or not. It is the instinct of greed that makes it do so.

But one may perhaps like to ask that if man is created with this instinct, should he be held answerable for his misdeeds? Will it be justifiable for Almighty Allah to punish him in this or the next world for his sins boosted by this instinct of greed? The philosophy behind the greed instinct is that it is desired to give impetus to Man's struggle for existence. It is also meant to boost his efforts to secure a good living in this world for himself and for others. In absence of this instinct, he would sit back without making good efforts to improve upon his way of life. At the same time, he has not been left without guidance on where to exercise guard instinct and how to have self-control over it. Islam has forewarned him that his life-span in this world is rather short compared with the everlasting life in the hereafter. As such those blessed with sense of reason and understanding apply their greed instinct in securing the pleasure of Allah and in attaining a higher status for themselves in the life hereafter.

The Islamic rules of zakat and khums and the prohibition of gambling, usury etc are designed to curb man's excessive greed for more and more wealth which tends to lead him towards vice.

They are meant to cause distribution of wealth and bring social justice. A man comes in to inquire from the Prophet of Islam as to who could be termed the richest. In reply he was told "The richest are those who are not enslaved by greed." In other words, man is required not to be subdued by the instinct of greed.