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Romans chapter nine deals with the issue of God's fairness: is it fair for God to extend His mercy to some people, but refuse to extend it to others?

It may be easy for you to read St. Paul's explanation that God is free to bring anyone He chooses into relationship with Him, and to condemn anyone who rebels against Him. "That's only fair," you might think. When you look at the circumstances of your life, however, do you continue to think God is fair? Do you think it's fair that other people are wealthier than you, or more popular than you, or more talented than you, or better looking than you?

The Holy Prophet Jeremiah accused God of being unfair when he saw how much easier were the lives of wicked people than his life. Jeremiah writes,

*Righteous are You, O LORD, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously? You have planted them, yes, they have taken root; they grow, yes, they bear fruit. You are near in their mouth but far from their mind. (Jeremiah 12:1-2)*

You can almost hear the self-pity in Jeremiah's voice: "hypocrites who flaunt their disregard for You have it so good, and yet I suffer terribly for my service of You. How can you be so unfair?"

The problem is not that God is unfair; as St. Paul states, God "has mercy on whom He wills" (Romans 9:18). The problem instead is that we humans too frequently indulge our greed, which provokes discontentment with our lives and jealousy and envy of others. One of the most prevalent ways in which we stifle our spiritual growth and compromise our relationship with God is through discontentment. We become dissatisfied with our lives, begin to envy the lives of

others, and - if we are not careful - turn against God as we blame Him for what we believe to be the shortcoming of our lives.

Our society is oriented around discontentment. The three-trillion dollar per year advertising industry exists largely to make you dissatisfied with our current situation in life; it constantly presents you with images and messages designed to seduce you into the continual pursuit of new possessions and experiences, often with the explicit message that we should have these things because we deserve them.

Holy Scripture strongly warns you against greed. Our Lord notes that, just as St. Paul listed envy and jealousies among the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:20-21), covetousness is one of the evils that come from within our sinful hearts (Mark 7:22-23). St. Peter calls Christian teachers who are dedicated to satisfying their greed “accursed children” (2 Peter 2:14), and St. Paul states that those who know the judgment of God against greed - but are nonetheless greedy - are equal to those who hate God (Romans 1:29-32).

St. Ambrose of Milan warns against greed:

*Who would not gladly climb and hold the heights of this virtue [of justice], were it not that greed weakens and lessens the power of such a virtue? For as long as we want to add to our possessions and to heap up money, to take into our possession fresh lands, and to be the richest of all, we have cast aside the form of justice and have lost the blessing of kindness towards all.*

St. Theophan the Recluse aptly describes the spiritual effect of greed on our souls:

*It happens that amusements, especially pleasant ones, give rise to depression, because while they are not sinful, they are unable to content the heart. Generally speaking, the inconstancy of emotions is characteristic to us. It is necessary to discard and overcome this, being concerned that one thing does not change; that is, that your most important decision, the goal of life you chose for yourself [i.e., to dedicate your life to God], always remains in force.*

*Can this really be?! God is asking your heart once and for all, and the heart desires God. For without God it is never satisfied, and is bored; examine yourself from this aspect. Maybe you will find the door to the peace of God there.*

Jealousy is a particularly destructive emotion, as the writer of the Proverbs points out, “Wrath is cruel and anger a torrent, but who is able to stand before jealousy” (Proverbs 27:4)? For example, imagine an occasion on which a friend wins award that you hoped to receive. At first you are simply angry that you did not receive the award. As you think about it, you begin to consider all the reasons why you deserve the award, and your friend does not. Then, as you grow more jealous, you start thinking of other times in which your friend received something that you believe he or she did not deserve. You start to think about all the ways in which you believe you are superior to your friend. Eventually, you become so angry that you tell your friend about his or her failings and your superiority. Before you know it, your jealousy over that award has destroyed your friendship.

The key to overcoming the destructive power of envy and jealousy is to develop an “attitude of gratitude.” Rather than being envious of others, try to be grateful for all the blessings in your life. St. John the Solitary describes one helpful method for developing gratitude for your life:

*When evening comes, collect your thoughts and ponder over the entire course of the day: observe God's providential care for you; consider the grace He has wrought in you throughout the whole span of the day; consider the rising of the moon, the joy of daylight, all the hours and moments, the divisions of time, the sight of different colors, the beautiful adornment of creation, the course of the sun, the growth of your own stature, how your own person has been protected, consider the blowing of the winds, the ripe and varied fruits, how the elements minister to your comfort, how you have been preserved from accidents, and all the other activities of grace. When you have pondered on all this, wonder of God's love toward you will well up within you, and gratitude for his acts of grace will bubble up inside you.*

You can make gratitude an integral part of your relationship with God, as St. Paul says, “(Give) thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20-21). Fr. James Meena explains why we should be thankful for our relationship with God:

*The spirit of Thanksgiving would be with us every day if we were indeed aware of our own 'nothingness' in relationship to all that which God has created. Consider yourself, you, one person, vis-a-vis the whole universe. You are infinitely smaller in that relationship than the*

*smallest grain of sand is to the widest beach on this planet. That's how infinitesimal we are, yet, He has given us so much. He gave us the Prophets of old to teach us His ways, and when we rejected them He sent us His Son in order that He might teach us the good news that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. And when the establishment rejected His Son, He fulfilled His promise and made the ultimate sacrifice that from that moment on, not a drop of blood need be shed in order to expiate the guilt of man, for God shed His blood on the Cross so that once and for all time we might have the capacity and the agency by which our sins would be forgiven. Now that is a lot to be thankful for.*

St. Peter of Damascus teaches that gratitude to God is a source of rich blessings: "When God is thanked, He gives us still further blessings, while we, by receiving His gifts, love Him all the more and through this love attain that divine wisdom whose beginning is the fear of God" (see Proverbs 1:7).

You can also be thankful for other elements in your life, as Fr. James further tells you:

*Why don't we think in smaller terms since we ourselves are so small; the little things for which we ought to be giving thanks. Each morning to be thankful that He brought us to another day, like a ship through the night, and to dedicate to Him the newness of the day. When we look upon the faces of our loved ones, the members of our family, the abundance of our household, our tables literally groaning with food, the plenteousness; when we experience the freedom of our land, that we live in a nation in which we are free to express ourselves, free to worship God as we elect or not to worship Him at all if we choose that; get up in the morning and go to our automobile and just push a button to open the garage door, turn a key and the engine starts and we travel a distance from our home to our place of employment that our forefathers used to have to plan for a whole day to make the same journey; to come home at night to be greeted by warmth and love and security.*

*We have friends in our parish family who love us, who trust us, friends in the neighborhood with whom we have good fellowship. We have the opportunity to work and to support ourselves so that we don't need to be dependent upon anyone for our livelihood. We have the opportunity to educate our children. So much for which to be thankful.*

When you are tempted to be jealous of others - and particularly to accuse God of being unfair because others have something you want - remember how richly blessed you are in your life. A great way of remembering these blessings, and thanking God for them, is to say every day the

Troparia of Thanksgiving from the evening prayers of the Church:

*Now that the day has come to a close, I thank thee, O Lord, and I ask that the evening with the night may be sinless; grant this to me, O Saviour, and save me.*

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.*

*Now that the day hath passed, I glorify thee, O Master, and I ask that the evening, with the night may be without offence; grant this to me, O Saviour, and save me.*

*Both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.*

*Now that the day hath run its course, I praise thee, O Holy One, and I ask that the evening with the night may be undisturbed; grant this to me, O Saviour, and save me.*

*Lord, have mercy. (12 times)*