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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO MATTHEW 6:11 AS A GUIDE AGAINST AVARICE IN NIGERIA

KINGSLEY SILAS NWOGU
Unit Head, Christian Religious Studies
School of Basic Studies, Ediene
University of Uyo,
Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria
cksnwogu@gmail.com

Abstract

The sinful nature of man has proven to be a major propeller towards selfishness. This innate nature of man which started right from the biblical times has metamorphosed into avariciousness which is a common occurrence in our present society. Nigeria has been bedeviled with this phenomenon since after independence that it has become a near normal occurrence and an open secret even to the international community. This made Max Siollun, an Oxford trained Lawyer, in his book "Soldiers of Fortune" to describe avarice in Nigeria as "Patrimonialism" where every opportune person grabs the "National cake". A saddening situation is the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where its leaders who are supposed to attract Government presence and development are also caught up in the web of this cancerous disease – avarice. This has left the area undeveloped, or underdeveloped. Avarice goes contrary to the Christian way of life and as a proactive measure against this innate nature of man, Jesus Christ in Matthew 6:11 provides a template for human desire: Give us this day, our daily bread. Therefore a phenomenological starting point for the prognosis of this disease from the veins of Christians in Nigeria lies in the understanding of this prayer. This work explains this passage exegetically while applying its meaning to Christians. It is also suggested that amongst others, churches should emphasize the ills of avarice.

Introduction

In recent times, the Nigerian society has been bedeviled with corruption and there is hardly any sector where this evil cannot be traced. This became so obvious that the president of Nigeria His Excellency, Mohammadu Buhari proposed "fighting corruption" as a focal point/agenda of his eight years rule in Nigeria (2015-2023). This phenomenon has become an open secret and many have the questions on their lips: why are Christians also caught in this web? Is there a solution from the Bible? When shall we be free?

Corruption is an offshoot which stems in most cases from Avarice. In Nigeria, the media, school, family, motivational speakers and even churches are awash today with thousands of messages telling the populace to pursue their own comfort, security, and pleasure. This advise in avertedly is becoming a norm in our society. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has witnessed it fair share of this corrupt practices which has left the region in a state of underdevelopment and lack despite its huge contribution to the economy of Nigeria as a whole. This work seeks to answer this phenomenological question and proffer solutions to this long lasting problem of man, Avarice, through an examination of Matthew 6:11. This shall

be done after examining the living conditions of the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Avarice: A Conceptual Definition/Framework

The word avarice etymologically originated from the Latin *Avaritia*, and can be defined as an excessive desire to acquire or possess more than what one needs or deserves. (Tucker, 2015, p.16). A simple definition given by Hornby (2005) is that avarice is "an extreme desire for wealth" (p. 85).

Avarice according to Tucker (2015, p.19) is among the seven deadly sins which are called capital vices or cardinal sins. The author further explained that these behaviours or habits are classified under this category if they directly give birth to other immoralities. He further opined that Thomas Aquinas gave a list of these vices in the 13th century as: Pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth.

These seven vices can be overcome by corresponding virtues as follows:

S/N	VICE	VIRTUE
1.	Vainglory/ Pride	Humility
2.	Greed	Charity
3.	Lust	Chastity
4.	Envy	Gratitude
5.	Gluttony	Temperance
6	Wrath	Patience
7.	Sloth	Diligence

A similar classification originated in Christianity from the desert fathers, especially the 4th century Monk Evagrius Pontius, who identified eight evil thoughts/spirits that are needed to overcome (Evagrius, 2006, p.62). A list as proposed by Evagrius is:

S/N	**GREEK WORD (TRANSLITERATED)**	**ENGLISH WORD**
1.	Gastrimargia	Gluttony
2.	Pormia	Prostitution/fornication
3.	Philarigyria	Avarice
4.	Hyperephamia	Pride
5.	Lype	Sadness/Envy
6.	Urge	Wrath
7.	Kenodoxia	Boasting
8.	Akadia	Dejection/Acedia

Though this list was later reduced to seven by Pope Gregory I in the 6th Century, according to Cassian (2000, p.98) it became fundamental to Catholic confessional practices as evident in penitential manuals. The church used it in order to help people curb their inclination towards evil before dire consequences and misdeeds could occur. The focus was especially on pride and greed, both of which are seen as inherently sinful and as underlying all other sins to be prevented.

Avarice: The Niger Delta Experience

The Niger Delta or Delta of the Niger River covers a vast area of approximately 70,000 square kilometers and has been adjudged as the largest wet land in Africa (Agbiboa and Maiangw, 2012, p.109). This wetland is believed to be made up of Marshlands, Lagoons, Creeks, tributaries etc. Jike and Okinomo (2008, p.68) assert that the Niger Delta is a "Panopoly of geographically contiguous states and a convenient nomenclature for resources allocation and distribution among nine States of South Nigeria". *Viz*, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers States.

To further drive the dividends of democracy to the grassroots within this region, a special body, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was created in the year 2000 by the then Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo with the aim of educating the youths of the region and bringing in infrastructural development to the oil rich region. This was mostly because from the 1970's "oil had eclipsed agriculture as the engine of the Nigerian economy" (Agbiboa, 2012, p.114), and the Niger Delta region was the bedrock of the oil which was discovered in Nigeria. Omotola (2006, p.8) put it clearly when he opined that throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria's oil contributed significantly to its export earning which rose to 96.1 percent as at the year 1996. By these assertions, it is sufficiently clear that the Niger Delta was almost solely responsible for Nigeria's total export earnings and contributes to the gross domestic product (GDP).

Ironically, a significant majority of the people of the oil rich region are still grappling with underdevelopment poverty, environmental pollution/degradation etc. Capturing the living conditions of the people vividly, Ibeano says;

> Only 27 percent of people in the Niger Delta have access to safe drinking water and about 30percent of household have access to electricity… poverty remains widespread, worsened by an exceptionally high cost of living created by the petro-economy … access to education, central to remedying some of these social conditions, lays abysmally when compared to other parts of the country (Ibeano, 2006, p.3).

The region has remained grossly underdeveloped despite the attempts by the federal government of Nigeria to change the narrative. This is because the total process of growth towards self-reliance and contentment by the peoples of the Niger Delta has remained oblivious. The people are still far from obtaining the means to be responsible for their own livelihood, welfare and future because it has been lost directly or indirectly. This can be linked to the concept of "internal colonialism" (Naanen 1995, p.46).

The internal colonialism theory among other assertions claims that the oppressive hegemony of Nigerian's three major ethnic groups *viz* Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo has in a way legitimized and explored the exploitation of the oil rich region without commensurate development. It is all the ways in which majority ethnic groups have come to attain political and economic powers on the basis of numerical superiority and the use of same to transfer resources from ethnic minority territories to areas controlled by the majority. This has significantly been observed all around the region which can only boast of dilapidated roads, poor infrastructural development, environmental pollution etc.

Again, the slow paced development of the region has been blamed on the difficult terrain of the area. Osontokon (2000, pp.7-8) believes that "in the case of the Niger Delta, the neglect is real. This neglect no doubt arises from the geomorphology and difficult terrain of the place, but it is real"

The above arguments notwithstanding, it has been suggested that the major reason for underdevelopment in the Niger Delta region is bad governance and corruption at state, local government and at the NDDC levels. Agbiboa *et al* (2019, p.113) believes that if government officials in the region have utilized judiciously their monthly allocations to better the lots of the people through job creation and infrastructural development, the situation would have been better than what is presently obtainable. The media space is awash of countless stories of leaders and past leaders of the region who were either accused or convicted of money laundry, wasteful spending, and other corruption practices examples are:

Rotimi Ameachi - Implicated for theft of ₦100 million by EFCC while serving at the Rivers State house of Assembly (EFCC, 2007).

DSP Alamesiyesega - Convicted of money laundering of over Two Hundred Million dollars (Usman2007, p.29).

Christine Ibori-Ibie - Convicted to money laundering of about 101.5 US dollars (Okobie, 2010)

Malam Niho Ribadu, former head of EFCC explained that in the year 2003 alone, 70% of oil revenue (about $14 Billion) was either stolen or wasted (Usman, 2007). He went ahead to explain that the corruption within the Nigerian State has made the proceeds from the sales of crude from the Niger Delta to be used to sustain and incubate a class of corrupt people, with little or non-left for the ordinary people of the Niger Delta. This pitiable condition of the Niger Deltans and their lands which are left useless after several explorations and pollution has forced the people to believe that the government has marginalized them. But what has truly robbed the region is corruption which stems from avarice.

Matthew 6:11 – An Exegetical Overview

The text Matthew 6:11 fall within a division of the book of Matthew chapter 6 commonly known as the "Lord's Prayer". There is also a general consensus concerning the division of the Lord's Prayer into six petitions. According to Barclay (1998, p.20) these six petitions are sub- divided into two parts with the first concerning God's majesty, purpose and will, while the second part concerns the universal needs of human (our present need, our past sin and our future welfare). It is important to note that a parable account of this prayer is also found in the gospel account according to St. Luke.

This petitions and division of the prayer is as follows;

Initial Address	Our father in Heaven
First Petition	Hallowed be your name.
Second petition	Your Kingdom come.
Third Petition	Your Will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Fourth Petition	Give us this day our daily bread.
Fifth Petition	And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
Sixth Petition	And do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one.
Doxology	For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever, Amen.

'Give us this day, our daily bread' is the fourth Petitions and focus text for this work.

Avarice: A Prognosis Through Matt. 6:11

Despite the fact that man is innately selfish and this has further led many to this cardinal sin called avarice, there is a vital message in the Biblical text which serves as a guide against this vice especially for the Niger Deltans, who are predominantly Christians.

The Lord's Prayer as a whole and the assertion "give us this day, our daily bread" specifically is a common/regular prayer within Christian Circles especially in Nigeria where Christian pupils are thought how to recite this right from their earliest days in school and in church. But the question remains, how can this assertion deter or discourage this vice called avarice? The solution lies on the proper understanding of this prayer. What then is this assertion?

The assertion/prayer "give us this day, our daily bread" is what could be called, a prayer of equality. A careful analysis of the prayer shows that the concept of equality stems from the following;

1) **The bread/food that was asked for was not personal but communal**. Matthew Henry (2011, p.1301) puts it clearly when he says "…food convenient for us and our families". The concept here contained is that we must be charitable in all things. It teaches charity and a compassionate concern for the poor and needy around us.
   Many people who are avaricious by nature always have justification for inequality like "anyone who works hard enough can succeed" Many people in Nigeria live in abject poverty not because they are lazy, but because an avaricious few have continually personalized the common wealth. The prayer "Give us" must be understood as a commitment to meeting the basic needs of every person around us. When we say "us", it must mean "all of us" and not "a privileged few".

2) **The bread that was asked for was not to last for generations, but a daily supply.**
   The Greek word transliterated *epiousios* in the text simply means daily ration/sufficient for the day (Ellison 1980, p.1379). Here, Jesus taught the people through this prayer not to take thought for tomorrow, but to constantly depend on divine providence.
   The prayer is a request not for excess but for the amount to get through each day as mirrored in God's instructions to the Israelites in Exodus 16:16. James Molhalland (2001,

p.86) opined that to curb avarice through this statement, it will require a resolve to abandon selfish desires and sacrifice especially on the part of the privileged few to deny self and the temptation to accumulate unneeded wealth.

A prototype of what Jesus was trying to portray through "epiousios" is found in Exodus 16:16 where Moses instructed the Israelite to gather only for their daily provision because God had instructed so.

3) **The bread that was asked for was "ours" and not that of others.**
Jesus was teaching a lesson on industry and honesty. Henry (2001, p.1301) captured it succinctly when he said "we do not ask for the bread out of other people's mouth, not the bread of deceit (Prov. 20:17), not the bread of idleness (Prov. 31:27) but the bread honestly gotten. The aim here is to help us curb the quest for ill-gotten wealth which has led many to sharp and/or corrupt practices.

4) **We ask for bread, not dainties nor superfluities**.
Bread was a staple eaten with every meal. So it was not a request for mere bread, but a deep seated request/plea for sustenance and what is/was required for sustaining the physical body (O'Neill, 1993, p. 46). Though the bread as it were was not nice, yet it was wholesome. This according to Henry (2011 p.1301) teaches us sobriety and temperance.
This insatiable quest for irrelevant wants is not in conformity to this prayer which is a model for Christian living. The Bible is replete with admonitions and examples which show the inherent evil which lies behind avarice, especially as a vice which leads to other evils. The examples of the children of Israel who were warned not to gather what they could not finish per day, lest it become foul (a problem) and Gehazi whose greed landed him a dreaded disease (leprosy) stands out clearly as a warning against avarice in the Old Testament.
In the New Testament, Paul warned Timothy against avarice while maintaining that many who follow this path always wander from the faith. To put it in its right place, Paul said the (avaricious) love of money is the root of all evil (I Tim. 6:6-11). Avarice is a fiercely condemned evil which is not to be heard among Christians. Jesus Christ talking about the avaricious love of money said that no one can serve both God and Mammon (Wealth gotten dishonestly) (Matt. 6:9-24). In Christian Circles, greed is idolatry and must not be found among the brethren (Col. 3:5, Eph 5:5).

Conclusion

This paper has been able to link corruption to avarice which is one of the capital vices otherwise known as deadly sins. Avarice has been described by Evagrius Ponticus as an evil which a Christian must overcome. The Niger Delta area of Nigeria has been under-developed despite the fact that it is one of the areas which Nigeria depends on for its revenue generation and sustenance. The exploration of oil in the area has left its water's and land polluted thereby depriving the people of many basic economically beneficial practices which includes agricultural. The several interventions and agencies saddled with developing and ameliorating the sufferings of the people have failed because of corrupt practices within these agencies. The saddening part is the knowledge that the perpetrators of these acts of corruption are professed Christians. A solution to this plague like vice is a proper understanding of the model prayer given by Jesus Christ, "give us this day, our daily bread". If the Niger Daltons can truly understand and practice what Jesus taught us, the narrative will surely change.

Therefore this work recommends that if we must overcome this plaque, the following must be actualised;

I. Christian religious leaders should emphasize that the congregants must eschew selfishness and think communally always.

II. The vanity and transient nature of worldly wealth should be emphasized to dissuade public servants from greedily amassing wealth for themselves and families especially when it does not rightfully belong to them.

III. Christians and religious leaders should be more involved in governance.

IV. The laws concerning corruption should be strengthened to facilitate timely trial and persecution of corrupt officials and leaders must desist from interfering with the course of the law when corrupt leaders are tried and punished accordingly.

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