

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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OF PRODIGALITY (THREE ARTICLES)

We must now consider prodigality, under which head there are three points of inquiry:

[\(1\)](#) Whether prodigality is opposite to covetousness?

[\(2\)](#) Whether prodigality is a sin?

[\(3\)](#) Whether it is a graver sin than covetousness?

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Whether prodigality is opposite to covetousness?

Objection 1: It seems that prodigality is not opposite to covetousness. For opposites cannot be together in the same subject. But some are at the same time prodigal and covetous. Therefore prodigality is not opposite to covetousness.

Objection 2: Further, opposites relate to one same thing. But covetousness, as opposed to liberality, relates to certain passions whereby man is affected towards money: whereas prodigality does not seem to relate to any passions of the soul, since it is not affected towards money, or to anything else of the kind. Therefore prodigality is not opposite to covetousness.

Objection 3: Further, sin takes its species chiefly from its end, as stated above ([FS, Question \[62\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#)). Now prodigality seems always to be directed to some unlawful end, for the sake of which the prodigal squanders his goods. Especially is it directed to pleasures, wherefore it is stated ([Lk. 15:13](#)) of the prodigal son that he "wasted his substance living

On the contrary, The Philosopher says (Ethic. ii, 7; iv, 1) that prodigality is opposed to liberality, and illiberality, to which we give here the name of covetousness.

I answer that, In morals vices are opposed to one another and to virtue in respect of excess and deficiency. Now covetousness and prodigality differ variously in respect of excess and deficiency. Thus, as regards affection for riches, the covetous man exceeds by loving them more than he ought, while the prodigal is deficient, by being less careful of them than he ought: and as regards external action, prodigality implies excess in giving, but deficiency in retaining and acquiring, while covetousness, on the contrary, denotes deficiency in giving, but excess in acquiring and retaining. Hence it is evident that prodigality is opposed to covetousness.

Reply to Objection 1: Nothing prevents opposites from being in the same subject in different respects. For a thing is denominated more from what is in it principally. Now just as in liberality, which observes the mean, the principal thing is giving, to which receiving and retaining are subordinate, so, too, covetousness and prodigality regard principally giving. Wherefore he who exceeds in giving is said to be "prodigal," while he who is deficient in giving is said to be "covetous." Now it happens sometimes that a man is deficient in giving, without exceeding in receiving, as the Philosopher observes (Ethic. iv, 1). And in like manner it happens sometimes that a man exceeds in giving, and therefore is prodigal, and yet at the same time exceeds in receiving. This may be due either to some kind of necessity, since while exceeding in giving he is lacking in goods of his own, so that he is driven to acquire unduly, and this pertains to covetousness; or it may be due to inordinateness of the mind, for he gives not for a good purpose, but, as though despising virtue, cares not whence or how he receives. Wherefore he is prodigal and covetous in different respects.

Reply to Objection 2: Prodigality regards passions in respect of money, not as exceeding, but as deficient in them.

Reply to Objection 3: The prodigal does not always exceed in giving for the sake of pleasures which are the matter of temperance, but sometimes through being so disposed as not to care about riches, and sometimes on account of something else. More frequently, however, he inclines to intemperance, both because through spending too much on other things he becomes fearless of spending on objects of pleasure, to which the concupiscence of the flesh is more prone; and because through taking no pleasure in virtuous goods, he seeks for himself pleasures of the body. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 1) "that many a prodigal ends in becoming intemperate."

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Whether prodigality is a sin?

"Covetousness [Douay: 'desire of money'] is the root of all evils." But it is not the root of prodigality, since this is opposed to it. Therefore prodigality is not a sin.

Objection 2: Further, the Apostle says ([1 Tim. 6:17,18](#)): "Charge the rich of this world... to give easily, to communicate to others." Now this is especially what prodigal persons do. Therefore prodigality is not a sin.

Objection 3: Further, it belongs to prodigality to exceed in giving and to be deficient in solicitude about riches. But this is most becoming to the perfect, who fulfil the words of Our Lord ([Mt. 6:34](#)), "Be not... solicitous for tomorrow," and ([Mt. 19:21](#)), "Sell all [Vulg.: 'what'] thou hast, and give to the poor." Therefore prodigality is not a sin.

On the contrary, The prodigal son is held to blame for his prodigality.

I answer that, As stated above ([Article 11](#)), the opposition between prodigality and covetousness is one of excess and deficiency; either of which destroys the mean of virtue. Now a thing is vicious and sinful through corrupting the good of virtue. Hence it follows that prodigality is a sin.

Reply to Objection 1: Some expound this saying of the Apostle as referring, not to actual covetousness, but to a kind of habitual covetousness, which is the concupiscence of the "fomes" [*Cf. FS, Question [81], Article [3], ad 2], whence all sins arise. Others say that he is speaking of a general covetousness with regard to any kind of good: and in this sense also it is evident that prodigality arises from covetousness; since the prodigal seeks to acquire some temporal good inordinately, namely, to give pleasure to others, or at least to satisfy his own will in giving. But to one that reviews the passage correctly, it is evident that the Apostle is speaking literally of the desire of riches, for he had said previously ([1 Tim. 6:9](#)): "They that will become rich," etc. In this sense covetousness is said to be "the root of all evils," not that all evils always arise from covetousness, but because there is no evil that does not at some time arise from covetousness. Wherefore prodigality sometimes is born of covetousness, as when a man is prodigal in going to great expense in order to curry favor with certain persons from whom he may receive riches.

Reply to Objection 2: The Apostle bids the rich to be ready to give and communicate their riches, according as they ought. The prodigal does not do this: since, as the Philosopher remarks (Ethic. iv, 1), "his giving is neither good, nor for a good end, nor according as it ought to be. For sometimes they give much to those who ought to be poor, namely, to buffoons and flatterers, whereas to the good they give nothing."

Reply to Objection 3: The excess in prodigality consists chiefly, not in the total amount given, but in the amount over and above what ought to be given. Hence sometimes the liberal man gives more than the prodigal man, if it be necessary. Accordingly we must reply that those who give all their possessions with the intention of following Christ, and banish from their minds all solicitude for temporal things, are not prodigal but perfectly liberal.

Objection 1: It seems that prodigality is a more grievous sin than covetousness. For by covetousness a man injures his neighbor by not communicating his goods to him, whereas by prodigality a man injures himself, because the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 1) that "the wasting of riches, which are the means whereby a man lives, is an undoing of his very being." Now he that injures himself sins more grievously, according to Eccles. 14:5, "He that is evil to himself, to whom will he be good?" Therefore prodigality is a more grievous sin than covetousness.

Objection 2: Further, a disorder that is accompanied by a laudable circumstance is less sinful. Now the disorder of covetousness is sometimes accompanied by a laudable circumstance, as in the case of those who are unwilling to spend their own, lest they be driven to accept from others: whereas the disorder of prodigality is accompanied by a circumstance that calls for blame, inasmuch as we ascribe prodigality to those who are intemperate, as the Philosopher observes (Ethic. iv, 1). Therefore prodigality is a more grievous sin than covetousness.

Objection 3: Further, prudence is chief among the moral virtues, as stated above ([Question \[56\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#), ad 1; [FS](#), [Question \[61\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#), ad 1). Now prodigality is more opposed to prudence than covetousness is: for it is written ([Prov. 21:20](#)): "There is a treasure to be desired, and oil in the dwelling of the just; and the foolish man shall spend it": and the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 6) that "it is the mark of a fool to give too much and receive nothing." Therefore prodigality is a more grievous sin than covetousness.

On the contrary, The Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 6) that "the prodigal seems to be much better than the illiberal man."

I answer that, Prodigality considered in itself is a less grievous sin than covetousness, and this for three reasons. First, because covetousness differs more from the opposite virtue: since giving, wherein the prodigal exceeds, belongs to liberality more than receiving or retaining, wherein the covetous man exceeds. Secondly, because the prodigal man is of use to the many to whom he gives, while the covetous man is of use to no one, not even to himself, as stated in Ethic. iv, 6. Thirdly, because prodigality is easily cured. For not only is the prodigal on the way to old age, which is opposed to prodigality, but he is easily reduced to a state of want, since much useless spending impoverishes him and makes him unable to exceed in giving. Moreover, prodigality is easily turned into virtue on account of its likeness thereto. On the other hand, the covetous man is not easily cured, for the reason given above ([Question \[118\]](#), [Article \[5\]](#), ad 3).

Reply to Objection 1: The difference between the prodigal and the covetous man is not that the former sins against himself and the latter against another. For the prodigal sins against himself by spending that which is his, and his means of support, and against others by spending the wherewithal to help others. This applies chiefly to the clergy, who are the dispensers of the Church's goods, that belong to the poor whom they defraud by their prodigal expenditure. In like manner the covetous man sins against others, by being deficient in giving; and he sins against himself, through deficiency in spending: wherefore it is written ([Eccles. 6:2](#)): "A man to whom God hath given riches... yet doth not give him the power to eat thereof." Nevertheless the prodigal man exceeds in this, that he injures both himself and others yet so as to profit some; whereas the covetous man profits neither others nor himself, since he does not even use his own goods for his own profit.

respective natures: thus, with regard to prodigality we note that it consumes riches to excess, and with regard to covetousness that it retains them to excess. That one spend too much for the sake of intemperance points already to several additional sins, wherefore the prodigal of this kind is worse, as stated in Ethic. iv, 1. That an illiberal or covetous man refrain from taking what belongs to others, although this appears in itself to call for praise, yet on account of the motive for which he does so it calls for blame, since he is unwilling to accept from others lest he be forced to give to others.

Reply to Objection 3: All vices are opposed to prudence, even as all virtues are directed by prudence: wherefore if a vice be opposed to prudence alone, for this very reason it is deemed less grievous.