

Commentators report that Wall Street's current turmoil represents the worst financial crisis in our country since the Great Depression.

A great deal of finger pointing accompanied by accusations of greed has been directed at our bankers, insurance companies and corporate leaders.

Michael Douglas was even asked recently to comment on the 1987 movie **Wall Street** wherein his character, Gordon Gekko, declared "greed is good."

Pope Gregory in the sixth century and Dante in the thirteenth expressed the opposite view; each considered greed to be one of the seven deadly sins.

Early in my career, a man told me that he believes greed is an addiction.

Many years before, he was a contractor on a big project. In order to fulfill the contract, he needed to purchase supplies from another company.

The distribution foreman at the second company insisted upon over billing for these supplies and demanded that he be paid a cash kickback each week.

Having carefully built his business on trust and credibility, the contractor refused to accept this arrangement. However, unable to obtain certain critical supplies elsewhere, he subsequently and reluctantly agreed to it.

The foreman insisted next that the contractor split the kickback cash with him, thereby insuring the contractor's complicity and further culpability.

Pay-off took place on Saturday mornings at the contractor's office.

Each week the contractor became more and more uncomfortable about these payoffs and privately resolved to find a way to get out of the situation.

But as weeks turned into months and the months stretched well into the next year, the contractor failed to terminate the arrangement.

The more cash he accepted, the easier it became to do so and as time passed, it became harder and harder for him to walk away from the "free" money.

Greed had become an addiction, he told me, and he wished at the time that a recovery program had been available to help him withdraw from his craving.

He didn't even want or need the money he was taking but said that it was just so easy to take it that it had become increasingly more difficult to resist.

Greed creeps up on a person subtly until it secures a tenacious hold on them.

Then, like a glutton at a dinner table, greedy people will continue to take beyond all need or reasonableness simply because assets are there to take.

This appears to be what has happened with many of our financial leaders.

When a misdeed occurs, guilty people inevitably try to blame the victim.

Our financial debacle is no exception. Accusing fingers have been pointed back at American mortgage, installment loan and credit card holders.

Let us look at the facts reported recently by reliable sources:

- 96 per cent of Americans pay their mortgages on time (CNBC-TV)
- The majority of US households have no credit card debt (Federal Reserve Board's latest survey of consumer finances, 2004).
- The national average credit card debt per credit card borrower is \$1,673 (Transunion, 2008)
- 40 per cent of card holders carry a balance under \$1000 (myfico.com)

Greed is a behavioral transgression on the part of corporate and financial leaders that has become detrimental to the financial welfare of Americans.

The contractor finally called his deal off, attributing his deliverance to fervent prayer. He was also afraid of being caught and prosecuted.

Many of our corporate and financial leaders appear to be unable to stop themselves. Moreover, since the financial tools they use are not illegal, they have little incentive to change their behavior.

Past behavior is the very best predictor of future behavior; they are not likely to change.