

“HOW MUCH LAND DOES A MAN NEED”

BY LEO TOLSTOY

Background on the Selection

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) was a Russian novelist and social reformer, famous for his novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, considered by many the greatest novels ever written. Born to a noble, landed family, his early years were marked by a dissolute life and a violent reaction to the horrors of the Crimean War. In 1862 he married and settled down, producing thirteen children and a burst of literary successes. After writing *Anna Karenina* he experienced a profound spiritual crisis and renounced his literary ambitions, believing them to be incompatible with his deepest convictions. His numerous later works were on religious and moral subjects. “How Much Land Does a Man Need?,” written in 1886, is an enduring story that reveals the sometimes insidious and sometimes overt destructiveness of greed—the deadly sin of avarice or *avaritia*—and challenges us to question our own self-awareness.

Group Discussion Questions

- 1 What criteria do the two sisters use to judge each others’ lives? By which of these criteria—or another—do you tend to evaluate your life?
- 2 What is Pahóm’s response to the women’s chatter? What does the Devil decide to do when he hears Pahóm boasting?
- 3 How does Pahóm change when he becomes a landowner? What is the common theme in his reactions to the ensuing news of various new and better lands?
- 4 What is the Bashkírs’ “one thousand rubles a day” policy? What is the real test of the policy?
- 5 What dream does Pahóm have the night before his journey? What is the dream’s warning? How does Pahóm excuse it?

6 Why does Pahóm die in his pursuit of the land? How much land does it take to bury him?

7 What is the heart of avarice as Tolstoy describes it? What makes its growth so difficult to detect or challenge? What might have checked the growing avarice in Pahóm?

8 Was Pahóm happy? Is there anything that might have finally satisfied him? What would really have been “enough” for him? For you? What would it take to create contentment with what we have?

9 Pahóm lives in a different society from the modern West. How is avarice different in a consumer society that ceaselessly tries to generate desire? How is Pahóm’s insatiability alike and different from consumerism? We know that the future seems better than the present, but why is it that today we are little more satisfied and unsatisfied than we were yesterday?

10 What did Pahóm’s avarice earn him in the end? How do we ensure that our human work has any enduring value? What, as Jesus asks, do we profit if we gain the whole world but lose our own souls?

11 How do your ambitions and life-goals appear in light of Tolstoy’s parable? What adjustments, if any, do you think might be appropriate?

12 How do you think greed impacts the wider society? Where do you see avarice operating in the political or economic arena? Can anything be done about it?

Further Reading

- *Steering Through Chaos: Vice and Virtue in an Age of Moral Confusion*, The Trinity Forum (NavPress 2001)
- *Doing Well & Doing Good: Money, Giving, and Caring in a Free Society*, The Trinity Forum (NavPress 2002)
- “The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg,” by Mark Twain, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1999.
- “The Gospel of Wealth” by Andrew Carnegie, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2005.