

Managing Consumerism

A rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find the Southern fisherman lying leisurely beside his boat.

“Why aren’t you fishing?” ask the industrialist

“Because I have caught enough fish for today,” said the fisherman.

“Why don’t you catch some more?” “What would I do with it?”

“You could earn more money,” was the reply, “with that you could fix a motor to your boat, go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats ... maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me.”

“What would I do then?”

“Then you could really enjoy life.”

“What do you think I am doing right now?”

Our Money ... our stuff... It’s such a big part of North American society and culture. Consume ... that’s the message of advertisers and we do it. The pressure is on to be successful, earn lots, get lots and enjoy it.

This can be such a difficult topic to preach on. I almost joking called this morning’s sermon “Welcome to Guilt Sunday” because that’s what we expect. We expect to feel guilty after someone speaks to us about our stuff. We expect that we should feel bad that we have money. And that refers to almost all of us in this room and North America. We live in an affluent society and so we are all in the same boat when it comes to this discussion. There is no pointing fingers in this room and saying “baaad you for having this stuff or baaaaad you for having that stuff.” This applies to each one of us.

So how do we encourage each other when it comes to managing consumerism? How do we take time to investigate what the Bible has to teach us without pointing fingers and making judgments? It’s by recognizing that we all live in North America together. It’s by agreeing that our question today is not, how I compare with my neighbour but how do I apply the words of Jesus in the context of this culture. This is where I live; these are the influences around me. How is God asking me to live in this context so that I bring glory to Him? As I have prepared for this week I have included myself in every aspect of the discussion because there can be no judgment. When it comes to money and stuff there is no empirical measurements as to whether or not someone is living according to the will of God. Rather it is an internal issue, an issue of the heart.

But let’s recognize that I’m not going to be preaching anti-money here, nor am I going to be preaching anti-stuff. A couple of weeks ago Darryl preached on giving thanks to God from whom all blessing flow. Let me remind you of verse 18 of Deuteronomy 8 “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today.”

Robert McClelland said this “It is not more godly to be poor than to be wealthy.” But, the meaning of my life, my identity, is not to be wrapped up and determined by what I have.

Earthly treasures are tools for the journey, providing provision and comforts along the way, but when life is done, so is their usefulness.

That being said we need to recognize that Jesus spoke more about money and possessions than he did about prayer, faith, heaven, hell and eternal life. So we need to ask why Jesus put so much emphasis on money and possessions. Why is there so much scripture about wealth?

There's a connection between our spiritual lives and how we think about and handle our money. We cannot separate the two and we need to be aware that there are dangers if we ignore the connection. Our spiritual attitudes and actions can be drastically affected by our understanding of our finances and possessions.

Our passage this morning gives us insight into 2 dangers we face when it comes to possessions and money.

1. The root of all evil.

In the Pink Floyd song entitled "Money" they have this line. "Money, so they say, is the root of all evil today." Well I disagree. I don't believe money is good or bad. Money is neutral. The issue comes with the attitude toward money. Namely, pride.

In the first part of our passage in Luke we have Jesus telling us a story about a certain rich man who crop has been very successful. "What to do with all this new found wealth?" is his question. He certainly has earned it, it is his crop from his field so what should he do with it. And as the story goes we discover that he decides to keep it for himself.

Pride ... I've earned this, this is all mine and it is all for me.

There is an attitude in our culture which tells us we are significant by what we have. Materialism and business cling to us because in our culture they give us significance. Money means freedom to do what I want, it means respect, it means happiness. Just watch T.V. for one evening and see how often we are told that everything we need in order to have the perfect life, in order to be significant, in order to be happy is at our fingertips just so long as we have the money to buy it, and if we don't there's always credit.

And those who exalt themselves and set their hope on their abundance tend to see what they own as the source of meaning and worth. Those who exalt themselves lean toward arrogance, self-sufficiency, and an incredible false security. Those who set their hopes on their abundance lean toward selfishness and see everything in terms of the material. Everything is evaluated in terms of the bottom line, including people.

And what's the result of this pride in my possessions. **Verse 20-21 "God said to him, you fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."**

Being rich toward God means storing up things, or spending ourselves, our time, our resources, on the things of God. Jesus tells us at the beginning of this parable that the good life has nothing to do with things, or with being wealthy.

Is this then the result of all who are wealthy, I hope not because by the world's standards that would include all of us. There would be no hope for us. However, recognizing the danger of pride is the first step.

The second danger is so closely connected to the first, it is asking ourselves the question

2. What is enough?

Our culture tells us we have to keep up with the Jones' (or here in Southern Manitoba it would be the Friesen's or the Peter's, the Marten's or the Bartel's and know the Ascough's, a good up and coming Mennonite name). Keep looking over the fence to see what they have that we don't.

We get bombarded with the message that we are entitled to having all the comforts my neighbour has. I earned it. I'm as important as they are.

But listen to the warning that Solomon, a man who had it all, gives to us.

“Those who have money will never have enough. How absurd to think that wealth brings true happiness! The more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So what is the advantage of wealth – except perhaps to watch it run through your fingers.” Ecc. 5:10-11 NLT

When money takes priority you will never have enough. I have caught myself saying, “Oh if only we had a bit more. We could pay this debt down, we could afford to do this or that, etc.” and where does that lead us. Not down the road of happiness but it can open a dangerous path and the real cost is my time, my family, my relationships, my health, stress. All can be lost in pursuit of that “little bit more.”

I doubt anyone has looked back on their lives and said, “You know I wished I worked more.” I wish I had spent less time with others and collected more stuff. In the end you will not be remembered by what you have but by who you are.

You can't take it with you. You never see a hearse pulling a u-haul.

So what is enough?

The College and Career Sunday School class has been studying a book called TREK – Venture into a World of Enough and there are some very challenging stories and ideas. One of the stories told by Dale Hildebrand goes like this.

After hours of mountain trails I get to Digayap, the home of Philippine Mennonite church leaders Norma and Edwin Lorenzo. Rice farms in the valley are bathed in soft color as workers walk home along green trails to their pots of cooked rice. Norman and Edwin's house is made of rough boards cut from surrounding trees with corrugated tin for a roof. It seems empty when I enter. A closer inspection reveals a collection of simple possessions: a mat, blankets and pillows for sleeping, two or three changes of clothing for each family member, and a few simple cooking and eating utensils. All their possessions would fit in a wheelbarrow. There were small plots of vegetables and fruit trees surround the house. Children appear healthy. As we sit in the glow of a homemade oil lamp after a supper of rice and sardines, I ask Norma and Edwin if they are happy with their lives. Except for the long distance they must travel to the schools and hospitals, they say, they feel content. We used to think the development process would allow poor people to catch up to the rich. But ecologists tell us we would need five more earth-sized planets to provide the resources and absorb the waste if everyone lived like the average North American. Instead of solving poverty by giving people slices of a bigger pie, we may need to change how we slice the pie.

United States retail analyst Victor Lebow explains, “Our enormously productive economy ... demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption ... We need things consumed, burned up worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.”

Consumer culture actively blurs the line between the “first set of things” we need to sustain our lives and the “second and third set” that weigh us down and sap our energy.

Which brings us to the picture Jesus paints for us in the second part of our passage in Luke 12.

Vs. 22-24 ... 27-28

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! ... Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will He clothe you!”

God promises to provide the “first set of things” food, clothing, shelter, the things we need to sustain life. The next question is, is everything else we own, the 2nd and 3rd sets, weighing us down and sapping our energy?

The question of enough is subjective. It is a heart issue between me and God. He will challenge me to live simply at times and maybe not at other times so I have more available for His use.

I remember before we left for Labrador Irene and I had a garage sale and sold a lot of our stuff. We knew we would not be returning for 3 years so we asked this question. “In three years of not having this, will I miss it enough to wish I still had it?” For some things the answer was yes but for most it was no. It would be an interesting exercise (and a somewhat fearful one) to walk around my house now and ask, “If I did not have use of this for a year would I miss it and wish I had it back?”

So what do we do, get rid of everything we own? I don't think so.

Just like one can have a lot of material possessions and be consumed by them, so can one have very little and still be consumed by gaining possessions. It's an attitude of the heart. It's laying my stuff before the Lord and asking how am I to use it to glorify God and bless others.

Which brings me to the final point, a way to avoid the dangers if you will. Darryl touched on this last week and I believe it is so significant that I want to reiterate it here.

3. Move from the Individual to Community.

In the movie Lord of the Rings we see how the power of one item affects 3 individuals.

There's Gollum who has abandoned all he has to own the ring, to feel the power and importance of “My Precious” as he calls it. It takes the place of all his relationships; he has personalized it as his precious. It is his sole focus of life.

Then there is Frodo, the reluctant hero. Who throughout the story shifts from wanting to destroy the ring for the good of all to wanting only what's become important to him. The power of the ring. We see the transformation, the good intentions transformed to the selfishness, greed, suspicion. The ring becomes a weight he cannot bear but cannot get rid of either.

And finally Sam, in my mind the true hero of the story. He never wanted the ring. He saw the damage it caused in others and his goal was to help get rid of it for the benefit of all. His focus was on what's best for the community.

Do you see the analogy when it comes to our money and possessions? Do they become “our precious” something we would never let anyone have access to or is our focus on using what we have to glorify God and to bless others, a focus on community.

1 Tim. 7:17-18

Tell those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust their money, which will soon be gone. But their trust should be in the living god, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and should give generously to those in need, always being ready to share with others whatever God has given them.

I heard a story about a couple who decided that they would never buy anything that they would not be willing to share. After some time they were able to buy a new car which they greatly enjoyed. However, within six months they sold the car. They found they were getting very possessive of it. They were reluctant to let others use it.

Things happen when you share your possessions. Things can get wrecked but in reality it's just stuff. Are not relationships more important?

Canoe story. Nice canoe, no \$ for present, lent it out. Damage, are you ok? It's just stuff.

The relationship was more important. Now please don't go complaining that I'm being arrogant, this is just one of those times God moved and we got it right.

John Neufeld of the Mennonite Foundation said this, "We have no financial crisis in our church at all. What we have is a crisis of commitment. Our level of giving speaks loud and clear, telling volumes about our priorities and commitments."

We need to ask ourselves individually and corporately as a church. "What are our priorities and commitments," is it a focus on individual or a focus on community.

Our attitude will greatly affect our giving, our generosity of time and possessions and it will give cause for the community to notice. Are we storing up riches on earth for ourselves or are we storing up riches in heaven by sharing the gospel through sharing from our abundance.

2 Corinthians 9:11-13

Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. So two good things will result from this ministry of giving—the needs of the believers in Jerusalem will be met, and they will joyfully express their thanks to God. As a result of your ministry, they will give glory to God. For your generosity to them and to all believers will prove that you are obedient to the Good News of Christ.

When you willingly and cheerfully give to the people and ministries that are in need you acknowledge the place and priority God has in your life. You reinforce that God is your first love, and the power of greed and selfishness in your life is broken.

This was a 7 year olds prayer at supper one night.

"Dear God please help the poor get rich and the rich get poor so they know what it feels like. And then, God, let everyone switch back to medium and let everyone have the same amount of food and money. Amen."

Being a sharing community in North America will have it's own unique dynamics and challenges. My experience has been that this is a generous church. Let's continue seeking God's direction individually and corporately and allow Him to stretch us to His glory and so the name of Jesus can be proclaimed through our actions.