

## CHURCH AND CULTURE

**Attitudes toward Life:  
Anxious Consumerism vs. Divine Contentment**

By Jerry Truex; June 20, 2010

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**A. Introduction**

Today we conclude our series comparing *popular cultural values* with *the way of Jesus*. In the past three weeks, we have looked at our culture's attitudes about God, others, and ourselves.

Today we will look at our culture's attitude toward life in general. What is life about anyway? Our culture answers that question in a number of ways. One answer is that life is about *possessions*, getting more-and-more things.

I will focus on consumerism and contrast it with the way of Jesus. I present the case that our culture fuels our desire to buy more-and-more stuff to fill our emptiness. I argue that our consumerism is caused by what psychologists call our "primal wounding". The way of Jesus says not only says "no" to consumerism, but also heals the primal wound.

**B. Consumerism**

Our culture values spending money. Our culture treasures buying more-and-more things. This is consumerism. It goes beyond materialism (the accumulation of wealth). It goes beyond the collection of more things.

Consumerism uses things. It spends, exploits, and devours. The consumer uses, discards, and wastes. The "right" to consume is a core value in our culture.

Most companies build products—computers, cars, cell phones—with planned obsolescence in mind. That is, they make things that will not last, so you will have to buy and buy again. Or companies will upgrade their products and force customers to buy the same product over again because it no longer functions with newer software or hardware.

Do you remember the movie we watch on our retreat called, *The Story of Stuff*? Do you remember the comment the lady made about computer processors? She remarked that you cannot buy a new processor for an old computer; rather, you have to buy a whole new computer because computer manufacturers make sure that newer processors will not fit older computers.

People become addicted to shopping. When they're border, they shop. Shopping has become entertainment. I saw a program on the rich and famous in Hollywood. One wealthy lady spent 20-30 thousand dollars per day on jewelry, clothes, or shoes.

Maybe you know the story of Imelda Marcos, the wife of former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, who was deposed in 1986. After the Marcoses had fled, and the palace over-run, it was found that Mrs. Marcos left behind 15 mink coats, 508 gowns, 1000 handbags, and 3000 pairs of shoes.<sup>1</sup>

Consumerism has heavy consequences. Overconsumption of food, entertainment, pharmaceuticals, and expensive toys hardly makes us healthier. Overconsumption means overworking and putting in less time with important relationships. Overconsumption means more waste, more pollution, more garbage landfills, more toxic dumps, and... as we now see in the Gulf of Mexico ... massive oil spills.

### C. The Primal Wound

What causes us to become addicted to such things as buying more-and-more stuff?

According to studies by two psychologists, John Firman and Ann Gila, the problem is what they call "the primal wound." Everyone experiences "primal wounding" in different ways, but our reactions are similar. They write:

We may feel this wound as a sense of anxiety or impending doom underlying all we do; or as a sense of estrangement, falseness, and lack of meaning in our lives; or perhaps as a fear of intimacy and commitment in relationships. Although we may only dimly glimpse this hidden wound, perhaps in the grips of a sleepless night, depressive mood, or personal crisis, this specter incessantly haunts us. Fleeing this wound, we desperately throw ourselves into addictions of all sort—sex, romance, and drugs to wealth, power, and violence.

This primal wound is the result of a violation we all suffer in various ways. In this violation we are treated not as individual, unique human beings, but as objects. Our supportive milieu [networks]—whether early caregivers, peers, institutions, or society at large—does not see us as we truly are, and instead forces us to become the object of its own purposes. In Martin Buber's (1958) terms, we are treated as 'It's' rather than 'Thou's.'<sup>2</sup>

We feel betrayed by our parents, our friends, society, and God. The world is a hostile place. We don't feel at home. In religious terms, our connection to our deeper Self, where we find God, is broken.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Imelda Marcos" in *Wikipedia*; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imelda\\_Marcos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imelda_Marcos)

<sup>2</sup> John Firman and Ann Gila, *The Primal Wound* (State University of New York, 1997) 1.

<sup>3</sup> "It is this wounded sense of self, this sense of emptiness and isolation, which underlines the violence, addiction, and greed disrupting our lives." Firman and Gila, *The Primal Wound* (State University of New York, 1997) 2.

In a seminar, Firman and Gila once asked participants to “imagine themselves in a situation during which they were beginning to feel the urge to engage in their addiction [like consumerism]. They were encouraged to allow themselves to feel this urge as much as they possibly could, but then to imagine they choose not to perform the addictive behavior. Instead of acting out the addiction in the usual way, they simply sat with this pressing urge as it cried out for expression.”<sup>4</sup>

They explored it for some time. Then Firman and Gila when to the chalkboard and wrote what people shared about their experience. Here is the list they made:

Worthlessness  
Lost  
Disconnection  
Lack of existence  
Invisible  
Bad  
Evil  
Void  
Empty  
Abandoned  
Powerless  
Nonbeing  
Unloved

The way of Jesus is not only at odds with consumerism, but it also redresses [heals] the underlying problem. The way of Jesus heals the primal wound.

## **D. The Way of Jesus (Matt 6:19-34)**

### **1. Exhortation: Store up treasure in heaven (6:19-21)**

**Matt 6:19-24.**<sup>19</sup> “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (NRSV).

Jesus tells people not to store up treasures on earth. He has two reasons:

1. Moth and rust consume them or else thieves carry them away.
2. One’s efforts are better put into storing up treasure in heaven

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<sup>4</sup> John Firman and Ann Gila, *The Primal Wound* (State University of New York, 1997) 14.

Instead of succumbing addictive consumerism, which fills the home full of stuff and leaves the soul empty, Jesus says *concentrate on God* or fill yourself with God.

Put your treasure in heaven is another way of saying, "Fill your soul with God, because nothing else will fit or satisfy you."

### a. First Parable: The good eye [= be generous] (vv. 22-23)

**Matt 6:22-23.** <sup>22</sup> "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy [open, honest; *Gk haplous*], your whole body will be full of light; <sup>23</sup> but if your eye is unhealthy (evil; *Gk ponēros*), your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (NRSV).

The phrase, "the eye is the lamp of the body," is a problem. For us, the eye is a window through which light comes in. But, in the ancient world, the eye was thought to have its own light. Light goes out of the eye.<sup>5</sup> So Jesus is stating a basic physiology "fact" at that time.

In Judaism, a "good eye" or "healthy eye" meant *generosity* (Prov. 22:9).<sup>6</sup> So Jesus is saying, "If your eye is healthy/generous, your whole body will be full of light or full of God."

This is important. Jesus is telling us how to reconnect with God: *Be generous*. That is an antidote to feeling empty, worthless; generosity is the antidote for addictions, such as consumerism, because generosity heals the primal wound.

In contrast, he says, "if your eye is unhealthy (evil, *πονηρός*)—selfish or ungenerous—then your whole body will be full of darkness or without God."

*The point is be generous.*

### b. Second Parable: The two masters [= serve God] (v. 24)

**Matt 6:24.** <sup>24</sup> "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (*mamōna*)." (NRSV).

Here, Jesus makes a basic economic statement that everyone would agree with: A slave cannot serve two masters. Have you ever heard of a slave owned by two people? It doesn't work.

<sup>5</sup> Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 143.

This amplifies the previous saying: "The 'healthy eye,' interpreted as the generous person, serves God. The 'unhealthy eye,' interpreted as the selfish person, serves mammon."<sup>7</sup>

*The point is be loyal to God.* To heal the primal wound, to overcome addictions like consumerism and the accumulation of stuff, put God's will first.

## 2. Exhortation: Don't Worry, God cares about you (6:25-34)<sup>8</sup>

Okay, so let's add this what Jesus has been saying:

- Do not store up treasure on earth (19-21),
- Plus be generous with what you have (22-23),
- Plus serve God instead of money (24)
- And what does that equal? ..... Anxiety!

### a. Don't worry (6:25)

<sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear (Matt 6:25).

Jesus supports this with three arguments.

#### (1) Birds (25-26)

His first argument uses a bird analogy.

<sup>25</sup> Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matt 6:25-26; NRSV).

Jesus is saying, "Look, God takes care of the birds, which are not as valuable as humans, so of course God will take care of you!"

Jesus assumes God is active in the world. We cannot see God, but when birds eat, God is feeding them. Jesus is saying, "Learn from nature that you can trust God."

*The point is trust God.*

<sup>7</sup> Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 145.

<sup>8</sup>This division is based on my observation that the word *merimna* (worry) occurs six times in 6:25-34, but only three times with the negative particle *mē* (25, 31, 34), following "the rule of three" throughout Matt 5-7.

## (2) Worrying (27)

Jesus' second argument against anxiety is this:

<sup>27</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? (Matt 6:27; NRSV).

Here, Jesus asks us to consider whether worrying accomplishes anything. Jesus is not against planning or concern for the future. Rather, Jesus is concerned about anxiety ... when our catastrophizing thoughts and emotions generate fire within us instead of light outside.

*Jesus' point is: Worrying is useless.*

## (3) Clothing (28-30)

Jesus' third supporting argument against anxiety focuses on clothing.

<sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? (Matt 6:28-30; NRSV).

*Jesus' point is: Learn from nature that God cares for you. "Nature teach us that God cares for what God has created?" God created you and I. God as Creator takes care of what He creates.*

### b. Don't worry (31-32)

Then Jesus repeats what he has just said:

<sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (Matt 6:31-32; NRSV).

Jesus' repetition suggests we are dealing with—not appropriate concern (which is good)—but with deeply rooted anxiety. The Gentiles (unbelievers) strive for food, drink, and clothing. Jesus unmask the root of anxiety and worry—*unbelief or the failure to trust God.*

### c. Don't worry (33-34)

Finally, Jesus addresses the issue of priorities:

<sup>33</sup> But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. <sup>34</sup> "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today (Matt 6:33-34; NRSV).

How does one strive for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness? To pursue righteousness is to pursue justice; to pursue a right relationship with God, others, and one self. Righteousness is synonymous with justice and peace and therefore with salvation.

*Jesus point is:* Seek righteousness. Pursue just and equitable relationships

## F. Reflections

Our society values and promotes consumerism. The problem is consumerism harms the soul. Consumerism is a symptom of a deep seated anxiety that we are worthless, empty, and separated from our Source of Being, namely, God.

Jesus addresses the issue anxiety and our experience of desperately trying to fill ourselves up with stuff to hide from and anesthetize our primal wound, our sense of alienation from God.

Jesus gives us the antidote to consumerism in this passage (Matt. 6:19-34).

1. Fill yourself with God (6:19-24)
2. Be generous (6:22-23)
3. Be loyal to God alone (6:24)
4. Trust God (6:25-26)
5. Worrying is useless and unbelief (6:27, 31-32)
6. Learn from nature that God cares for you (6:28-29)
7. Seek justice and peace in all relationships (6:33-34)

"God wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full - there is nowhere for him to put it" — Augustine of Hippo (City of God)