

Consumer disease - rejecting slavery, restoring sacrifice

John Hegley poem p28

I like that poem - it expresses something of what we have lost in valuing profit more than people.

My task today is a tricky one. As part of our series on money - which I think is very welcome and long overdue - I want to look at consumerism.

I want to look at some principles of how we ought to spend our money, expose some of the practices which should cause us unease and consider slavery and sacrifice as a means of understanding our present condition. So that won't take long. I am leaving some time for questions near the end, so if you think of one, hold on to it until the question time.

One difficulty in preparing this talk is that I see our attitude to money as something that should be a seamless garment. Like the linen ephods worn by the Levites in the temple, there should be a seamlessness in our approach to finance- an integrity, a wholeness to it all. But in a series of talks you have to break it down somehow. I am therefore going to say very little about money and the environment - a crucial area of the clash between Christianity and consumerism - as Andrew Jones will address that in two weeks time. Likewise faith and finance and giving are topics yet to come. But I do want to start by outlining some broad principles which integrate all these areas and which I believe are firmly rooted in Scripture.

The Bible has a lot to say about money. As you came in today you received a bible verse about money. What you may not know is that every person received a different verse. Can you wave them? When you get home you can look up the context. In fact there are thousands to choose from. Jesus does not talk about sex at all in the gospels yet money or the lack of it appears in one in every ten verses. What a difference to the church today - which appears obsessed by sex and yet is often silent about money. We have emphasised personal responsibility and neglected social responsibility, when both are vital to our faith. (Amos 2:7)

So what are good principles in relation to money? And what are the antitheses we see both inside and outside the Christian community?

Generosity (Greed) - Proverbs 22:9, Matthew 20:15, 1 Titus 1:18
Contentment (Dissatisfaction) - Philippians 4:11,12, Hebrews 13:5
Wisdom (Foolishness) Proverbs 14:24, Proverbs 17:16
Justice (Exploitation) Proverbs 29:7, Amos 5:12, Luke 11:42
Gratitude (Ingratitude) Luke 7:41-43, Colossians 3:17, James 1:17
Humility (Pride) Jeremiah 9:23, 1 Timothy 6:17
Faith (Rejection of God) Psalm 37:6, Philippians 4:6

Now its very easy to list these and for you to nod your heads, but living them is one of the greatest challenges we face. We shouldn't underestimate the assault we face daily on these principles. It is countercultural. And there is a tension between some of these principles - wisdom and faith, contentment and justice, generosity and humility. That is good - tension causes us to examine what we're doing more closely, to seek advice from others, to wrestle and to pray and to learn from mistakes.

So hold these principles in your mind - both today and in future talks. I'm not going to unpack them further today. I have printed them on little credit cards to take away - with a prayer on the other side, more of which later.

But this talk really focuses on generosity, justice and contentment.

I've called it 'Consumer dis-ease'. Not just because I think that consumerism is unhealthy, infectious, easily spread but hard to cure. But also because we should feel dis ease. We should not be at ease with it. Ease is one of the false promises of our obsession with buying things. Dis ease is the first step in realising there is another way.

In the rest of this talk I want to consider slavery as something bound up in consumerism that we need to reject, And then consider sacrifice as something bound up in our faith that we need to embrace.

You're probably beginning to realise that I don't think that unfettered consumerism has a sound moral basis.

If you're not sure, consider the following.

Money facts powerpoint

You see the rich are getting richer and the rest of us are sold false promises that we can have a life of convenience.

Life was never meant to be convenient. Christ doesn't say my yoke is easily accessible and upgradable wherever you see the sign. He says my yoke is easy. (Matt 11:30) Why? Because it is designed to fit. We still have to work, we still have to put effort into living - but with Christ's priorities, Christ's example and Christ's encouragement life becomes full, rich and exciting - all the things that the latest phone or car pretends to be.

So what did Christ invest in? People. He spent himself entirely on them. Perhaps if we knew what it was like to waste ourselves on others we'd understand why a prostitute wasting perfume on his feet made perfect sense (Luke 7:46-47). If we gave our all without expecting return, if we dedicated our lives to justice for all of God's children we would feel the same anger that overturned the tables in the temple (John 2:15), that called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27), that saw the greed in the heart of rich young ruler where others saw only moral uprightness (Mark 10:23).

Time and again Christ cuts to the heart of the issue - and often the issue is money. Particularly the injustice that stems from a life that worships Mammon not Yahwe.

Do we tithe? So did the Pharisees - even their herbs (Luke 11:42). Imagine a Nigella recipe saying two tablespoons of fresh coriander - and a half teaspoon to church. But what was neglected?

Justice and the love of God. Our money is supposed to be spent on achieving God's justice, not perpetuating man's injustice

There is a cost to justice - it is a higher cost than charity. Writing in the mid 19th century, Henry David Thoreau observed that philanthropy is the only virtue that is consistently over celebrated. We laud big donations - but do we attach the same importance to lives of simplicity, spent tackling the root causes of the poverty others donate to salve.

In the 19th century the people of Largo, a village near St Andrews, resolved to boycott sugar and rum. They said they were "denying themselves the indulgence of delicacies that are prepared by cruel stripes". What were they referring to? Slavery.

You see 200 years ago, rich households used to have servants at home and slaves overseas – both were exploited, but its easier to degrade and exploit someone faraway. Wilberforce's monumental struggle to abolish the slave trade was as extraordinary as it was effective. But the story isn't over. I won't repeat what you saw on the slide earlier about modern slavery, suffice to say that globalisation has in fact exacerbated the worst excesses of the 19th century but in ways that are more palatable to our modern sensibilities.

The servants are no longer under the stairs - we have washing machines and dishwashers made halfway across the world at the lowest cost and highest profit. Slaves continue to be captured in their homeland and shipped overseas. And whole nations are forced into servitude to make us our luxuries and 'essentials' instead of building homes and schools and hospitals. You see it is not just slavery itself as we've traditionally understood it, as in the cocoa fields of the Ivory Coast, the largest supplier of our beloved chocolate. It is also the slavery like conditions that so many in the world are subjected to, such as in the trainer factories of Thailand, and also the new slavery of extreme poverty in an age of unparalleled wealth. These are all different manifestations of a contempt for God's children that we have bought into, however unwittingly. It is profoundly unjust - and my reading of the Bible makes it fairly clear whose side God is on - that of the poor, the oppressed, the widow and the orphan. Will we join him? We need to make the sacrifices that lead to justice for all of God's children.

You see we have lost the art of sacrifice. Not entirely but certainly in relation to money. Before getting married the not yet Mrs McNeish and I decided not to sleep together. It was a sacrifice, believe me. But we both felt it was consistent with our Christian faith, our understanding of Scripture and our desire to live holy lives. And we were supported in this decision by teaching in church, encouragement from church leaders and the example of friends who were also making the same decision. Which made it easier, if not easy.

We need to develop similar support for one another in our finances. We need to encourage sacrifice - sacrifice that leads to greater generosity, sacrifice that celebrates contentment, sacrifice that leads to greater justice. To be able to give more we need to be content to spend less. To be able to practice justice we need to spend more, with greater wisdom.

What I appreciated about the talks on debt the other week was the honesty and vulnerability of those taking part. No pretence - this is how it is. Flicks is not the only person in the church who would like more self control with money. Colin is not the only person who wants a plasma screen TV or VW Golf. My life was also changed by a cash flow diagram. Lets drop the pretence and admit to one another the scale of the problem we face in disentangling ourselves from the spending frenzy.

So what does this mean?

We must change! The seven principles I outlined (generosity, contentment, wisdom, justice, gratitude, humility, and faith) need applied to every area of our finances. And the tensions debated. We need a vision of where we want to get to and a solid idea of the next step, however small and faltering.

I want to stimulate discussion more than provide pat answers as I think it's only by asking God and one another and learning from what is godly in one another that we'll come to a fuller place of understanding.

I don't expect everyone to make the same financial choices I've made, but I do want to be on a common path of greater integrity with regard to money. I'll happily talk with anyone who is interested about the choices we have made with regards to housing, pension, employment, giving and so on - what we think works, what we're still working on. What I don't want to do is pretend we've figured it all out.

You see what we really need is a vision - a shared ideal of Godly spending and investment.

Just thinking briefly about some different areas in turn

Shopping - What if we actually involved God in our spending? That's why the credit cards I've made have the seven principles on one side and on the other an ATM prayer. In the Celtic tradition prayers were said when carrying out routine tasks. Not many of us rake the ashes every night - but we all visit cash machines. So the ATM prayer seeks to consecrate ourselves to God as we take out cash - a small reminder of our higher purpose.

All giving God

As I withdraw cash, let me not withdraw from you

Grant me a generous heart, content to spend itself on you

Amen

Clothing – is there a hidden cost to our bargains? What if we were as passionate about fair trade cotton as we are about fair trade coffee?

Food - what if we had a better sense both of feasting and fasting? And ate in a way that didn't ravage the environment - a plug for Andrew's talk in a fortnight.

Transport – how would contentment affect our addiction to car travel and cheap flights?

Housing - What if we viewed the equity in our houses as belonging to God not us? What does it mean to open up our homes – or even sell the spare ones?

Stocks and shares - what if Christians refused to make money from, for example, weapons of warfare, tobacco, the destruction of the environment or the scramble for oil? Either directly in their own investments or indirectly in their pension or insurance policies. And what if we learned the value of contentment now, so that we didn't need as big an income when we retire? What else?

And what if instead of complaining that we don't earn enough, or overcommitting ourselves, we under committed ourselves? What if we started celebrating our abundance, living on less and less so we can give more and more away, ensuring that every pound we receive or spend is consecrated to God, used to establish his Kingdom, not undermine it.

I could go on! It's a tricky area – because asking these questions exposes where our heart is –and often it's not where we like to pretend it is.

But rather than keep talking I thought it would be better to give you some time to ask questions about what you've heard. We seem to have stopped asking the questions and just accepted a certain standard of living.

We're putting a pile of resources on the church website to help you consider, individually, with trusted friends or in cell groups, how to continue to ask these questions.

Perhaps you're feeling a little overwhelmed. Good! It's when you're out your depth that you call for help.

But don't be put off by the scale of the problem. I think we're paralysed by the enormity of our limitations and hypocrisies and so we make each other feel better about the difficulties rather than honestly engaging with them. Alastair McIntosh says "If we do nothing because we think we cannot do enough we misread profoundly the game of life."

Instead, let us take our fledgling integrity and shelter under God, like chicks under a mother hen (Matt 23:37). Not to hide from our responsibilities, but to learn from God how to be mature.

Lets challenge one another - spur one another to greater things. And as a church let us oppose injustice - personally and collectively. Let us see consumerism for what it is - the worst excesses of the human condition in monetary form. It does not have to be this way. Let s reject slavery in all forms and embrace sacrifice. God did not specify time or geography or make conditions when he proclaimed:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,
Isaiah 61:1

God has declared it - he's just waiting for us to agree.

Let's pray

All giving God

You see our hearts – what chokes them and what frees them.

Forgive us for our greed. Instead give us cheerful, generous hearts.

Forgive us for our dissatisfaction. Instead grant us contentment with the abundance we have.

Forgive us for the foolish financial decisions we have made. Instead give us a spirit of wisdom that leads to greater joy in our responsibilities.

Forgive us for participating in the exploitation of others, however knowingly or unknowingly. Instead give us hearts that yearn and act for justice for all your children.

Forgive us for our ingratitude in the face of your generosity. Instead impart to us a spirit of gratitude that transforms us and those around us.

Forgive us for our pride and self reliance with our money. Instead may your ungrasping humility become our ungrasping humility.

And forgive us for rejecting you when we open our wallets. Instead gift us faith that can overcome the death of unfettered spending, faith that enables us to take greater risks, and above all faith that opens our eyes to a vision of your economy, which spends all it has on love.