

Bible study 1: God vs Stuff

Opening

Share with the group, or journal, about a time when something you thought would make you happy led to deep anxiety or disappointment. What was it? Why did it fail to fulfil your expectations?

Happiness waits at the Stuff-Mart: the promise of Consumerism

'Happiness waits at the Stuff-Mart. All you need is ...Lots...More ...Stuff!'

So sing the representatives of 'Stuff Mart' in the Veggie Tales video Madame Blueberry. Of course, it's crudely put, but when you get right down to it, this is the promise of modern consumerist culture. It holds out the promise of happiness. But can it deliver?

Recently, in The Age newspaper, appeared an article which spoke of consumerism reaching even into childhood. Read the following extracts together.

'The increasing corporatisation of childhood has created miserable young people who have much, but value little.

These children are too young to understand, but much of their discontent and many of their anxieties stem from the corporate capture of childhood, that is, the way modern business corporations shape children's dreams and desires, determine their school experience and influence their behaviour and values.

Modern affluent societies overflow with a cornucopia of goods produced for the entertainment, pleasure, convenience and education of children, yet increasingly there are signs that in some of the most prosperous nations, particularly English-speaking countries, something is amiss. Those same children seem to be less content, more stressed and less healthy than any previous generation...

The consequence of this corporate capture of childhood has been a generation of children who have been manipulated, shaped and exploited as never before. Not only have they lost the opportunity to play and develop at their own pace, their psyches have been damaged and their view of the world distorted.

They are trained rather than educated and constantly tested to make sure they have absorbed the "correct" information. They are supposed to seek happiness in possessions, treat relationships as a means to an end, and incessantly compete with each other. Children have never before been under such pressure to "succeed, conform and look good".

(Extract from The Age, 'Girls and boys come out to buy,' by Sharon Beder, August 17, 2009.)

- Would you agree with this extract? Why or why not? If yes, do you think that this is true also beyond childhood?
- Can consumerism deliver on its promises? Why or why not?

God vs stuff: a rival religion?

We all know consumerism surrounds and immerses us, and we have a sense that perhaps this is not such a good thing. But is it really a case of God vs Stuff? Is consumerism really a religion, a rival to the One True God and allegiance to Jesus as Lord?

Read Martin Luther's explanation of the First commandment.

"You shall have no other gods."? ???

What does this mean?

Answer: We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.??

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Read this extract from the Large Catechism.

'This is exactly the meaning and right interpretation of the first and chief commandment, from which all the others proceed. This word, "You shall have no other gods," means simply, "You shall fear, love, and trust me as your one true God." Wherever a man's heart has such an attitude toward God, he has fulfilled this commandment and all the others. On the one hand, whoever fears and loves anything else in heaven and on earth will keep neither this nor any other. Thus the entire Scriptures have proclaimed and presented this commandment everywhere, emphasizing these two things, fear of God and trust in God.????

What does Luther say characterises true faith? What about false religion?

In your experience, how does consumerism call you to place your fear, love, or trust elsewhere than in the One True God?

Wrestling with the Word

In your group, read aloud Matthew 6:19-34.

(Note: in verse 24, some translations say 'you cannot serve both God and money.' The word translated 'money' here in Greek is 'mammon' which is a transliteration of a Hebrew word which comes from the same root word as 'amen.' It basically means, 'Something in which you put your trust.' It would be quite proper to translate this word as 'Things in which you put your trust' – or, equally proper, 'Stuff.')

- What does Jesus say about God and stuff?

Reading v24 and 25 together, what does Jesus say is a result of trying to serve – or run after – Stuff?

- What is the result of serving and trusting in God?

Read Colossians 3:5. What does God say greed is equal to?

Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10.

- Is money in itself a bad thing?
- What causes the problems? Why?

Read Matthew 13:18-23. What is it that Jesus says are the 'thorns' that can choke out the word of God and make it unfruitful?

Would Jesus agree that Consumerism – the Pursuit of Stuff – is a rival religion to faith and trust in the One True God?

In the light of the bible readings above, read and respond to the following quote:

'I have come to believe that the major threat to the viability of our faith is that of consumerism. This is a far more heinous and insidious challenge to the gospel, because in so many ways it infects each and every one of us.

I was trained as a marketer and advertiser before I came to Christ, and when I look at the power of consumerism and of the market in our lives, I have little doubt that in consumerism we are now dealing with a very significant religious phenomenon. If the role of religion is to offer a sense of identity, purpose, meaning, and community, then it can be said that consumerism fulfils all of these criteria...an advertising executive recently confessed to me that they are now deliberately stepping into the void that was left by the removal of Christianity from Western culture.

Much of that which goes by the name advertising is an explicit offer of a sense of identity, meaning, purpose, and community.' Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of things to come*, p107

- In what ways does advertising offer a sense of *identity*?

- In what ways do you see advertising offer a sense of *purpose or meaning*? What are some of the ads that you are thinking of?
- How does consumerism offer a sense of *community*? How do ads portray this?

Biblically, the One True God always wants what is good for us - our freedom, wholeness, and enjoyment.

Idols or false gods, on the other hand, always try to enslave us, trap us by holding out unfulfilled promises, and make us less than human.

- How do you see the promises of consumerism drawing you in? What 'stuff' do you find most attractive or enticing? What 'stuff' do you find yourself spending time thinking about? ('Stuff' can also include experiences (holidays, events, education etc) and the promise of better relationships as well as tangible material things)
- What things make you deeply anxious? What most worries you? How does this display lack of trust in God?
- How do you think consumerism detracts from your humanity? How does it detract from others' humanity (eg sweatshop labour in Bangladesh making cheap garments for our benefit)?

The Gospels tell the story of Jesus' interaction with two men, each of whom was enslaved and made less human because of their commitment to Stuff.

Read Mark 10:17-31 (the story is also found in Luke 18:18-30) and Luke 19:1-9.

- What are the similarities between the two stories?
- What are the differences?
- What is Jesus' response to the Rich Young Man? (see Mark 10:20-22)

- How does the Rich Young Man leave Jesus? Why?
- What is Jesus' response to Zacchaeus? (Luke 19:5,9)
- How does Zacchaeus respond to Jesus? Do you think he is sad or joyful?
- Where would you put yourself in these stories?
- What do you sense God calling you to repent of, in the battle against the idolatry of consumerism?
- What do you think Jesus wants to do about your enslavement by the false gods of consumerism? How does he want to set you free? In what ways might that begin to happen? (Get as specific as possible...)
- In this study, what has God been saying to you? What are you going to do about it?

Conclusion: Steps to Freedom from Stuff

Jesus has come to set us free, to liberate us from our sin, idolatry, anxiety and everything that burdens us and makes us less than human. Jesus has also come to call us to help other people find freedom. At first glance, the power of Stuff – the marketing machine of Consumerism – seems so powerful, so unstoppable, that it seems impossible that we might be free. But the story of Zacchaeus (and of many people who have heard Jesus' call and followed him through the centuries) shows us that Jesus IS Lord. Jesus IS the one who is in control over all the powers and authorities in the world. By his death and resurrection, he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. To hear and follow his call is to join him on the winning side of God vs Stuff. As people who belong to Jesus, we CAN die to sin and rise to new life, be set free and follow Jesus into real life. Because consumerism is so pervasive, it takes intentionality, grace and discipline to daily live in the freedom that Jesus gives us. The next few Bible studies and sermons related to the Big Issue will look at some of the ways we can access the grace of God in our lives in this crucial battle against Stuff. You are welcome to use these Bible studies to help you discover God's freedom from stuff for yourself.

The topics/ Christian practices include:

- **Sabbath and rest:** (Entering God's rest. You are not defined by what you do or how much you produce. seeking freedom for us from what binds us – anxiety, busyness,)

- **Generosity** (Entering into, and sharing in, God's grace and generosity. Recognising that we are stewards, not owners. Calling us to use wealth as God's not ours)

- **Service** (Discovering the liberating truth that people are more important than things)

- **Justice** (Seeking freedom for others. Meeting with and advocating for the poor. Discovering God's liberating heart.)

Conclude with prayer You might like to spend some time in personal prayer, confessing to God anything that he might have brought into your conscience by his Holy Spirit, and asking for freedom from the pervasive power of Stuff in your life.

[1]Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church (342). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.