



A few weeks ago we looked at the impact of choice on modern society and the way that it elevates individual preference, prioritizes ourselves over others, and effectively isolates us from the people around us. Quoting Hilary of Poitiers, a 4th century church leader, Os Guinness says that the effect of choice is clear in the twentieth-century shift from production to consumption. Prior to then, production was slow and limited because products were handmade, so consumption was able to keep up easily with production. But with the booming of the Industrial Revolution, production was able to outstrip consumption by far, so marketing and public relations were invented to stimulate consumption.

The result was the mighty engine of the consumer revolution in the last century. Christians rarely put consumerism alongside obviously dangerous ideas such as relativism, but is there any doubt that its damage has been just as severe—and all the more so because it is less noticed? Hilary of Poitiers put the point clearly in the fourth-century, long before modern consumerism:

“But, now-a-days, we have to do with a disguised persecutor, a smooth-tongued enemy; who scourges us, not with lashes, but with caresses; who instead of robbing us, which would give us spiritual life, bribes us with riches, that he may lead us to eternal death; who thrusts us, not into the liberty of a prison, but into the honors of his palace, that he may enslave us; who tears, not our flesh, but our hearts; who beheads not with a sword, but kills the soul with his gold; who sentences not by a herald that we are to be burnt, but covertly enkindles the fire of hell against us. He does not dispute with us, that he may conquer; but he flatters us, that so he may lord it over our souls. He confesses Christ, the better to deny Him; he tries to procure a unity which shall destroy peace; he puts down some heretics, so that he may also crush the Christians; he honors Bishops, that they may cease to be Bishops; he builds up Churches, that he may pull down the Faith.”

In the fourth century Hilary was dealing with a heretical emperor who was using the empire's wealth to make life easy and comfortable for those who agreed with him, essentially bribing Christians and their leaders to side with him on his heretical view of Jesus. It isn't nearly as overt, but the temptation to prioritize a better job, a bigger house, more conveniences, and so on over family, church, and faith is all around us, incrementally drawing us away from the Lord when it can.

The circumstances are different, but Esther faces a similar situation. She has access to any product or service she might want, and she is unaware of what is happening in the outside world and how it might affect the people most important to her. So after inviting input from trustworthy sources and clearly defining reality, she says “No” to everything that might distract her and whole-heartedly pursues God. In a court dominated by hedonism, she denies herself in order to serve God, whatever the cost.

Discussion Questions

How do comforts and conveniences often hinder our ability to hear God clearly? How can self-denial clear the air and help us hear and understand God better?

How do disciplines of self-denial (fasting, etc.) prepare us for the occasions when following Jesus will be risky or cost us significantly?

What is hindering your ability to pursue God, and what can you do to minimize or eliminate these hindrances?