

Considering Consumerism

by John Page

Trust in Possessions		Trust in God	
Value: Consumption		Value: Stewardship	
Focus on:	Style and Quantity	Focus on:	Substance
	Self or clan		God and neighbor
	Want		Need
Desire	Leads to:	Called to:	Result
Fulfillment	<i>Extravagance</i>	<i>Practicality</i>	Contentment
	<i>Covetousness</i>	<i>Generosity</i>	
	<i>Selfishness</i>	<i>Charity</i>	
Status	<i>Pride</i>	<i>Humility</i>	Place
	<i>Isolation</i>	<i>Community</i>	
Security	<i>Apprehension (of loss)</i>	<i>Confidence (in God)</i>	Assurance
Independence	<i>Distraction (of possession maintenance)</i>	<i>Simplicity</i>	Interdependence
	<i>Slavery (to our desires)</i>	<i>Submission (service to one another)</i>	
Leisure by efficiency	<i>Increased expectations</i>	<i>Sabbath</i>	Rest by stopping
Unsustainable (from the perspectives of justice, resource use, environmental quality, peace, service to God, and personal satisfaction)		Sustainable	

See Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34
(particularly Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message*)

The chart contrasts trust in possessions with trust in God. Trust in possessions places a high value on consumption or consumerism, as in a “theory that a progressively greater consumption of goods is economically beneficial” and as in an “attachment to materialistic values or possessions.” Yuval Noah Harari when discussing capitalism and consumerism in his book on *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* says on page 349:

“The capitalist and consumerist ethics are two sides of the same coin, a merger of two commandments. The supreme commandment of the rich is ‘Invest!’ The supreme commandment of rest of us is ‘Buy!’ The capitalist-consumerist ethic is revolutionary in another respect. Most previous ethical systems presented people with a pretty tough deal. They were promised paradise, but only if they cultivated compassion and tolerance, overcame craving and anger, and restrained their selfish interests. This was too tough for most. The history of ethics is a sad tale of wonderful ideals that nobody can live up to. Most Christians did not imitate Christ, most Buddhists failed to follow Buddha, and most Confucians would have caused Confucius a temper tantrum. In contrast, most people today successfully live up to the capitalist-consumerist ideal. The new ethic promises paradise on the condition that the rich remain greedy and spend their time making more money, and that the masses give free reign to their cravings and passions – and buy more and more. This is the first religion in history whose followers actually do what they are asked to do. How, though, do we know that we will actually get paradise in return? We’ve seen it on television.”

The Christian position on possessions is not that they are inherently bad. What we have is a gift from God. It is the relationship to possessions that under girds consumerism versus that which is a part of Christianity that is the problem. How we relate to possessions affects our relationship with God and with others. Possessions and God are two masters, only one of which we can serve (Matthew 6:24).

When advocating consumerism, our culture encourages a focus on style and quantity over substance, as well as a focus on self or clan over God and neighbor. Inherent in consumerism is a trust or reliance on possessions to meet several fundamental desires, including:

- Fulfillment (satisfaction of perceived needs);
- Status (higher standing in relationship to others);
- Security (freedom from doubt, anxiety, or fear); and
- Independence (freedom from control or influence of another or others);
- Leisure by efficiency (rest achieved through laborsaving devices or exploitation of others that reduces the effort and time associated with meeting our wants, expectations, and obligations).

For some, a reliance on possessions to fulfill these desires is successful; however most see partial or short-term success or no success at all. Even for those who see success, how much is merely the perception of success or settling for second best is open to question. It is more common that reliance consumption results not in fulfillment but extravagance (more is even better), covetousness (my life would be even better if I had what others have), and selfishness (focus on seeing that one's own needs are met). If possessions bring status, it can lead to pride (conceit) and isolation (cut off from others). Security gained by possessions is eroded by apprehension (fear of loss of those possessions). Instead of independence, one can find distraction (as one attempts to keep track of and maintain one's possessions) and slavery (to our desires). Instead of more leisure and an easier life, we find we are expected to and choose to use time saved by laborsaving devices or exploitation of others to further increase our productivity and gain or accomplish more.

Christianity emphasizes not consumption but stewardship, stewardship of God's gifts. The Christian emphasis is marked by a calling to:

- Practicality (a focus on need rather than want) instead of extravagance;
- Generosity (willingness and desire to give) instead covetousness;
- Charity (willingness and desire to help those in need) instead of selfishness;
- Humility (modesty in behavior, attitude, or spirit) instead of pride;
- Community (an interacting, mutually supporting population) instead isolation;
- Confidence in God instead of apprehension;
- Simplicity instead of distraction; and
- Submission to one another instead of slavery to our desires.
- Sabbath (interrupt our frantic pursuits and stop) instead of trying to achieve leisure by accomplishing everything in less time.

But, what about our desires for fulfillment, status, security, independence, and leisure time? The Christian emphasis addresses these desires but with a slightly different focus, a focus on our true need. Within the Christian emphasis, one finds contentment (satisfaction with what we have), place (a position from which to contribute to society), assurance (freedom from doubt that comes from placing our confidence in God), interdependence (mutual dependence), and rest (inner peace and completeness in living in God's presence).

Finally, in the end, consumption is not sustainable. As one wag once said, “you cannot have everything; where would you put it.” Consumption is unsustainable from the perspectives of:

- Justice—when we seek more, when others do not have the basic necessities of life;
- Resource use—given that the world’s resources have limits;
- Environmental quality—given our tendency to ignore the environmental costs of production and consumption;
- Peace—given the selfishness and covetousness associated with consumerism;
- Service to God—since it is impossible to serve two masters; and
- Personal satisfaction—since possessing never seems to achieve the level of satisfaction coveted in the wanting.

I, and I am sure others, stray back and forth across the line down the center of the chart despite our best intentions as people of faith. Our living in a culture of consumption does not help. What we must ask ourselves is which side of the line we tend to occupy more, both in our lifestyle and in our daily decision-making.

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