

Consumerism, Birds and Simplicity

Luke Bushman, July 23rd 2023. Reflections from Matthew 6

We have been working through a sermon series regarding creation care. In April I had the opportunity to attend a retreat in Manitoba, focused on educating young people like myself more on the climate crisis, and also to give attendees a more hopeful outlook. We talked, worshipped, and learned, connecting our spirituality to our desire to do something about the climate crisis. We also had a chance to sit down with members of Manitoba's Climate Action Working Group and discuss different topics of interest to us, that they had researched.

I participated in a conversation regarding consumerism, and its effects on the environment. This is a topic that has interested me for some time, as I have thought about the things I need or want, and how many things I desire or have, are really unnecessary, and frankly, wasteful. One of the things we talked about is how pervasive consumerism is in our world, and how it is just as much an attitude we have, as it is a problem. **SLIDE CLICK**

“Consumerism is a contemporary phenomenon. Unfortunately, it’s closely linked to another current problem: pollution. Indeed, both topics go hand in hand. Overproduction damages the planet whilst merciless consumption gives rise to waste that exceeds reasonable ends.” (Sanchez)

Just to give two examples of how extensive this phenomenon is, we can look at the distribution of products, and the production of textiles.

“According to S&P Global Platts Analytics, the shipping industry currently accounts for between 2% and 3% of global CO2 emissions and could be 17% by 2050 if left unregulated.” (Sinay Maritime Data Solution)

Over consumption is not just a problem, it is clearly a problem that shows no signs of slowing down. That 3% is simply the moving of products not to mention their manufacturing. Just the clothing industry has significant ramifications for our world.

“100 billion items of clothing are manufactured each year. Currently, a person buys an average of 60 percent more clothes than 15 years ago. For this reason, the fast fashion industry has imposed the trend of single-use clothing. Indeed, if people only kept their clothes for a year, CO2 emissions would be reduced by 24 percent.” (Sanchez)

Clearly our world's current attitude towards consumerism is not sustainable for a prolonged period of time. To disengage with consumerism as a whole is a daunting task, as consumption is woven into the very fabric of our culture. What does Christmas look like if we consume less? Birthdays? Fashion trends? Our economy? There are a lot of questions about what a shift away from our current trajectory could look like, but it is no question that something has to change.

There is a fantastic, informational movie about this topic. It explores a future where we have overconsumed, and have to flee our own planet. This documentary of the future is **SLIDE CLICK** called Wall E. Wall E is a movie about a cute little robot who is left behind to organize landfills and search for signs of life, after humanity is forced to live on a large space ship to survive. The first time I saw this movie as a kid, I thought the premise seemed rather far fetched. Venturing into space instead of focusing on preserving our planet? Ridiculous. **SLIDE CLICK** <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jeff-bezos-space-heavy-industry-polluting-industry/>

The goal of our reflection this morning is not to give you a sense of doom and gloom, and have us all anticipating a future like Wall E. There is a lot of hope for our future, and we can look to Jesus himself for guidance regarding our consumption habits. Jesus lived a life of simplicity, and often taught his followers to do the same. In Matthew 6 which was read earlier this service, Jesus talks about not worrying about what we own, and the foolishness of stockpiling earthly treasures.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth”. Throughout my life I have lived in spaces of various sizes. I have moved from having one bed in a bunk bed, to my own room, to my own dorm room, to a shared basement suite with, to a larger shared basement suite with Becca, to a house and then to a bigger house. I have noticed in all of these transitions, that despite occupying larger and larger spaces, these spaces feel like they have the same amount of stuff in all of them. It seems that items are like gas, where they fill whatever container they are put in. My living space has hardly become less cluttered despite going into larger spaces. I have talked to others about this same phenomenon and they have had similar experiences. Why do we accumulate things? I have come up with three reasons that I think I acquire more and more possessions.

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- Something to do
- Status
- Security

Something To Do

When we sat and talked about consumerism at our retreat, and wondered why we enjoy getting more and more things, this was actually one of the first answers that came to my mind. I explained to those around my table that, even in times where I cannot afford to purchase items, I spend time when I am bored looking at different items. Such is the power of the internet, that we can window shop while sitting on our couch. We have eliminated even going for a stroll with a friend to do some window shopping. I think a lot of items are purchased in boredom, or in chasing that little rush we get when we have something new. These items don't suppress our boredom for long, and quickly begin collecting dust, or as our text puts it, get eaten by moths and rust.

Status

Often our possessions are a status symbol for us. I think for most of the people I spend time with this reason is not at the front of their minds when making a purchase. However, there is certainly something to be said for the effects of living in a capitalist structure full of advertising. While our new house or car may not be purchased with the intent of being better than anyone, it is the natural next step in our world to upgrade when possible. So while I may not buy a Gucci bag to show off my wealth, I might buy a nicer car in pursuit of moving onto the next step in life. It is sort of like the board game LIFE, where you are always trying to move to the next square.

Security

I think this is the most reasonable and common motivation behind us getting more possessions. While Jesus does reference the carefree nature of animals in his discussion about wealth, and animals do not stockpile as much as we do, there is something instinctual about getting resources and holding onto them tightly. **SLIDE CLICK** This is my dog Cola, she is a blue heeler, or an Australian cattle dog. They are domesticated dogs, but were bred with dingoes, meaning they have several wild characteristics. They are typically used as working dogs, and so they have an excess of energy, are very possessive of their owners, and due to their wild nature are often guilty of what is called “resource guarding”. Resource guarding is when an animal feels the need to protect things they see as valuable at all costs, ranging from food, all the way to affection. With training you can avoid dangerous instances, but often dogs who resource guard will bite if they feel you are taking something valuable to them. This is not an inherently bad or evil thing, it is a form of survival. This idea of needing security extends all the way to us as human beings, and I think can play a role in both consumerism, and anti consumerism. For some it means over purchasing for security, and for others, it means being frugal and diligent about holding onto anything that could potentially be useful.

So we have established that Jesus says, not to store up treasures, and also some reasons why we may be tempted to store up our treasures. Where do we go from here? What wisdom will help us break out of the shackles of consumerism?

The advice that Jesus gives is rather simplistic. Jesus believed that the key to not end up chasing after material goods, was a trust in God to provide. Jesus pointed to how God provided for the nature that surrounded the people to help them understand God’s role in providing for the needs of people. The birds do not have the same infrastructure that we do that enables us to store and prepare, and they are okay. The flowers can not make or purchase clothing, and yet they are clothed in great beauty. Throughout Christian history, followers have lived out passages like this in different ways. There are Mennonites who have focused on living simply, Amish folks who have avoided constantly adopting the newest technologies. We have followers who own the same things as the culture that surrounds them, and believers who participated in the Monastic movement, giving up all their possessions in reliance on God. What does Jesus’ reflection on God’s provision for creation, and anxiety mean for us? What are we

to do while existing in a culture of consumerism? Going back to our passage: **SLIDE CLICK**

And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 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?

I don't view Jesus' words here as a definitive commandment on a specific way to live. I think that Jesus is making an observation that can inform our decision making in different ways. Jesus is pointing to the importance of nature, and how we can learn of God's provision from the way nature is provided for. When we look at God's beautiful world, we are to recognize that our ultimate existence comes from God, and operate within that knowledge. I don't feel I am in a place to tell people how to live out this text specifically. That would be hypocritical since I consistently participate in the consumerism machine. So I will instead share a little bit about my journey with consumerism and this passage.

I love clothes. I always have. When I was younger, I spent all my money on different soccer jerseys that I thought were interesting. As I grew older and had other things I was financially responsible for, buying 100\$ jerseys became no longer feasible. I have never had an abundance of money, and so for many years I updated my wardrobe by going to both thrift stores, and also different fast fashion stores. The clothes were cheap, and current, and were a great way of expressing the kind of person I was. While I was in college however, I started to learn more about how unethical these clothes were. How they were made in horrible working conditions, that exploited the environment and human beings, all so that I could have a current T Shirt for under 20\$. My solution to loving clothes, wanting to express myself, and not having a ton of money was to start trying to shop at Thrift Stores as much as I could. I have friends who have started buying clothing only from ethical brands that cost more money. This means fewer, but longer lasting outfits in their wardrobe.

There is not one right answer for how to interact with Jesus' calls to simplicity, and the present climate crisis. I hope however, that we can let our lives be shaped by some core truths.

1. Our world is a beautiful and wonderful place.
2. Our world is in danger and consumerism is not helping the climate crisis.
3. God is the true provider and sustainer in our world, not our goods.
4. Jesus calls us to reflect on nature, and it's sustenance to guide our own lives.

May we find ways of living out Jesus' reflection on God's provision. May we look at nature and see a beauty that compels us to live different

“What Are Five Environmental Impacts Related to Shipping?” Edited by Sinay Maritime Data Solution, *Sinay*, 7 Mar. 2022, sinay.ai/en/what-are-five-environmental-impacts-related-to-shipping/.

Sanchez, Edith. “Some Curious Facts about Consumerism.” *Exploring Your Mind*, 8 Apr. 2023, exploringyourmind.com/curious-facts-about-consumerism/.