



**Faithful Consumerism**  
**Philippians 4:10-20**  
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As a junior in high school, I took a part time job working for The Sport Shoe. When the store filed for bankruptcy, I found a new job working for Circuit City. At both stores, I worked on the sales floor. Perhaps it doesn't say much for me and my skills on the sales floor that both of my high school employers went bankrupt and are now closed. But for as poorly as the companies performed at large, I think I was actually quite the salesman. I knew everything there was to know about men's and women's athletic shoes, and I could find one that fit your needs and lifestyle; and I knew everything there was to know about desktop computers and their peripherals, and I could convince you I had the computer you wanted and needed. Not only did I know the computers well, but I knew which accessories were necessary, and which ones I could get you to buy.

Computers have changed a lot in the past 20 years, but the pricing structure has not. Desktop computers are actually fairly well priced. The margin on the computer itself is not near as high as you would expect it to be. But the margin on the accessories and the service plans – they're astronomical. The markup on computer cables, ink cartridges, software, and any extended warranty is outrageous. As a salesperson paid on commission, those accessories and service plans were also the way to pad the paycheck. I mentioned last week I played a lot of sports, so I didn't have a lot of time to work. My senior year, I was working a single 8-hour shift each week. But let me tell you what, for a high school senior, I was making **bank**.

At first, you might think, good for you. Every high school student should find employment to help pay for oil changes, gas for the car, and for going to the movies with friends. That kind of money seemed like chump change; that was a drop in the bucket for me. I wasn't making small bills; I was making *big* bills. When I entered college, I not only bought a sound system for my dorm room, I had the best entertainment system on the campus.

Do you know what happens when you go into college with little financial obligation, and a lot of financial resources? I can tell you what happened to me – with such unnecessary abundance, it's easy to become an unhealthy consumer.

I'm convinced consumerism is developed in our lives as a combination of affects from the nature verses nurture spectrum. As created beings, we have a natural need to consume. God has given us, from the creation of the world, as living organisms, a physical need to consume food to maintain our health. We cannot escape the need to consume, or we will die. For clothing and housing, we have a need to be in the consumer market to aid in our well-being.

But for as much as we have a God-given mandate to consume for our well-being, most of our consumer practices are developed through nurturing – that is, the external input into our life.

Consumerism around the globe varies by the local societal pressures and cultural habits. While there are noticeable disparities in the consumer habits among those living here in America and those living in an impoverished nation like Mozambique due to obvious differences in our societies, there are also many differences in the consumer practices of those living in varying cities in our own nation, such as Seattle and Dallas. As children, we pick up consumer habits from the norms of the communities in which we were raised; we pick up consumer practices that are based on the wealth of our communities; we pick up consumer patterns that are based on the commodities that were available in our communities; we learn consumer behaviors based on the occupations of our parents and neighbors. As adults, we adjust our consumer lifestyles based on our chosen occupation, our city of residence, our family norms, and our financial well being.

As someone who developed really poor consumer practices at a young age, I can tell you from my experience, that from time to time, it's a healthy necessity to revisit our consumer practices.

Consumerism, gone unchecked, can easily become detrimental to one's personal and family life. Just so, consumerism, unrestrained, can also negatively affect our relationship with God and with one another. See, "consumerism is not as much about having more as it is about having something else; ... it is not simply buying but shopping that is the heart of consumerism."<sup>i</sup> In a world driven by consumerism, we turn virtually everything into a commodity – something that can be bought, sold, and used. In such a world, commodities, services, ourselves and other people are seen as having no purpose but to provide *short-term* gratification.

To reject this kind of unhealthy consumerist model and culture is hard, because it is beckoning us around every corner. Whole companies thrive on breeding the consumer mentality. Just last year, in 2016, over \$500 billion was spent on global advertising. And advertising has changed significantly in the digital age. Advertising used to be all about offering product information. But those days are long gone. Today, advertising is about associating certain feelings with a product or a person. This is why political ads are more times than not offered from a negative perspective. If you can associate negative ideas with a person, the voter is sure to disassociate from that person on the ballot. In this way, advertising has become more about branding. "Branding ... is about creating relationships between people and things. Associating in one's mind with certain brands gives a sense of identity."<sup>ii</sup> By advertising with a focus on branding, by associating identity with brands and products, companies are able to build tribes of followers.

Because of this shift in consumerism – from buying simply what is needed – to shopping based on the identity created by purchasing, consumerism has offered people meaning, and character, and has created whole communities based on product acquisition. And while we often say consumerism is at the peril of spirituality, let's be clear, "consumerism is not simply

people rejecting spirituality for materialism. For many people, consumerism is a type of spirituality.”<sup>iii</sup>

But consumer spirituality, joining a consumer tribe, always leaves its followers dissatisfied with life as it is. “Consumerism represents a constant dissatisfaction with particular material things themselves, a restlessness that constantly seeks to move beyond what is at hand.”<sup>iv</sup> We may enjoy what we have, but as our brand, company, or tribe creates new, improved, better, more advanced, or shinier products, we find ourselves dissatisfied because we don’t have the latest and greatest. “Possession kills desire; familiarity breeds contempt.”<sup>v</sup> We get bored quickly, and move on to acquire, use, and discard the *next* great thing.

With consumerism defining our nation, being a foundational tenant of our country’s origin, being the literal economic foundation of our country’s wealth through the selling and using of people, how do we redeem the dissatisfaction of ownership that encourages and sustains such an unhealthy mentality based on consumer acquisition?

Many of us, myself included, try to set limits for ourselves. We say, “If I only had ... fill in the blank ... I would so much more content, and after that, I wouldn’t need anything else.” We say the answer is to buy the one last thing we want or need. That is the false promise of consumerism. It just so happens to also be the definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. In this endeavor to fulfill our material desires, there will *always* be something else. There will always be one more thing that you want or need.

Others might claim the answer is to give up on consumerism altogether. Yet, even for the most faithful, cutting consumerism out of our lives isn’t realistic. As we have already stated, we were created to be consumers. You must consume in order to live.

Perhaps then, the better question is, what kind of consumption leads to abundant life?<sup>vi</sup>

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he gives us a glimpse of faithful consumerism. His answer to consumerism is to define faithful contentment.

Our text today comes right at the end of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Thus far, Paul has offered multiple teachings regarding faithfulness in Christ and responding faithfully to God’s teachings, and here at the very end, Paul pauses to offer a word of thanksgiving to the community. But Paul’s offering of thanks is a bit awkward. It’s like he doesn’t know how to offer a true word of thanks. Hear his language, “I rejoice in the Lord greatly that *now at last* you have revived your concern for me.” ... What a backhanded compliment. Thanks for *finally* getting around to helping me out. And the awkwardness doesn’t stop, Paul continues, “You were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I’m saying I was in need; I’ve learned to be content with whatever I have.” ... Again, his praise is a bit underwhelming. “It was nice of you to finally help me out ... I didn’t really need the help, but thanks anyway.”

He continues, perhaps trying to explain his lack-luster thanksgiving. He says, “I’ve been wealthy and I’ve been poor. I have learned what it was like to be hungry and be well-fed. I learned what it was like to have plenty and to be in need. In all circumstances, I have learned to be content with whatever I had. I have learned that in all things I can be content, for my strength comes from Christ.”

And in this often quoted scripture, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me,” we find Paul’s purpose for writing. We often take this statement out of context. Paul isn’t claiming he can physically do anything; he isn’t claiming to be more gifted than he is; he isn’t hoping and pining for strength to break out of his jail cell, from which he writes this letter. Paul is making a statement in regards to his material contentment. “He is defined neither by wealth nor poverty but by a contentment that transcends both and by a power in Christ which enables him to live in any circumstance.”<sup>vii</sup>

His awkward thanksgiving continues as his focus shifts from his contentment toward that of the Philippians. Paul says, “You know that in my early days of ministry, no one supported me like you. More than once, you sent me help when I was in need. But you should know, I wasn’t seeking the gift, I was seeking your profit – that you may progress in your own faith.” Paul is walking this delicate line. He’s trying to give them thanks for the gifts they have provided, but he wants to make sure they know their giving him gifts is not what is most important. He claims, faithfulness is what drives our contentedness, not self-praise and being showered in thanksgiving. “The gift from the Philippians is not the main purpose of Paul’s writing, but secondary in importance to their own concord and adoption in the mind of Christ.”<sup>viii</sup>

Perhaps in the midst of our own times of uncertainty, perhaps in our own concern for the current and future financial markets, perhaps in a world that is driven by the acquisition model of consumerism, this is a time “for the church to lead the way in a reassessment of what makes for true contentment and real happiness. ... For Paul, the secret of contentment is abiding in the love of God in Jesus Christ and finding the purpose of life in responding to his call to share God’s love in concrete ways with all others.”<sup>ix</sup>

I could hunt through and pick out the scriptures that define the most radical of shifts in our consumer mentality. I could preach, teach, and call for us to practice Jesus’ call to the wealthy young ruler: we could sell all that we have, give the money to the poor, and start wandering as vagabond disciples. I think *Washington Street on the street* would be a force to be reckoned with. But perhaps selling all that we have isn’t the most radical shift we can implement. Perhaps the most radical shift isn’t simple detachment from material things. Perhaps a more faithful, and even more radical shift, would be to reframe our relationship with material things, and transform our relationships with one another. Perhaps a better approach to consumerism isn’t to deny our need for material things, it’s to rebuild our desire for the things of the world in light of our desire for Christ. Perhaps we can shift our consumerism view of goods to a sacramental view of creation, in which we embrace all of creation as a sacred output of God.

“A sacramental view of the world sees all things as part of God’s good creation, potential signs of the glory of God; [in such a view,] things become less disposable, more filled with meaning.”<sup>x</sup> In such a shift, not only our connection with goods, but also our human relationships and our self-use become about faithfully living into the body of Christ we have been called to be. Instead of striving for more at the result of meaningless consumption, we focus our efforts on being better stewards of what we already have. How can we find contentment in what we have, utilizing the material goods we already have, the relationships we have with one another, and the gifts of our own being to more faithfully celebrate and live into God’s call for the community of faith to exemplify the life of Christ in the world?

If you take an honest look at the world today, you’ll see it is a lack of contentment that undermines true community everywhere. Our need for more stuff is a driving force for companies utilizing detrimental industrial practices. Our need for more money is a driving force for unfair wages and abusive personnel policies. Our need for more power is a driving force for abusive relationships and diminishing other people. Our need for more acceptance is a driving force for dishonesty. Our need for momentary happiness is a driving force for wasteful spending, climbing debt, and endless acquisition.

But Paul, in echoing the voice of Christ, says that all we need has been given us in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. We have been given true love that satisfies all hunger and all thirst. We have been given the gift of life that satisfies all need and want. We have been given by God all necessary gifts to play our part in the community of Christ. Instead of seeking to capture and acquire more, we are called to give thanks to God for what we have, to realign our relationships with one another, to rethink how we use that which we already have, that our life and our witness may be a faithful expression of our thanks to God, in whom we are made content. May we reframe and reshape our consumer mentality, to adopt a love of being content and celebrate that in Jesus Christ we are filled beyond content with the great love of God. For the glory of God – Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William T. Cavanaugh. *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*. Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Fred B. Craddock. *Philippians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 2011.

<sup>viii</sup> Daniel L. Migliore. *Philippians and Philemon: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Cavanaugh.