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Session 6



GLOBAL EDITION

EDITED BY: JASON FILETA



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Session Six

Justice and Consumption: Possessions Are Not Power

“The witness to simplicity is profoundly rooted in the biblical tradition, and most perfectly exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ.”

- Richard J. Foster

“When we recognize that the people who make our stuff have hopes, dreams, and personalities, we can’t help but care about whether their job pays them a living wage and allows them to reach those dreams.”

- Kelsey Timmerman

Definitions

Fair trade: A system of selling and buying goods that ensures greater justice and fairness in trade. Farmers and workers get better prices and wages, decent working conditions and fairer terms of trade.

Cooperative: A farm, business or other organization which is owned and run jointly by its members, who share the profits or benefits. Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity.

Simplicity: Cultivating a lifestyle of modesty in consumption. When we choose to live simply, we consume less, which in turn aids in the decreased demand for goods produced cheaply and often unjustly.

The Value of Cotton by Rachel Dixon

Makandianfing Keita¹ is a cotton farmer from Mali. Before joining a cooperative his family struggled to survive because cotton prices were going down and down until they were below the cost of production. Because of this, the community struggled:

- Children had to walk 10km to go to school, which made school unattainable for many
- Pregnant women had no access to healthcare. Many died in childbirth and there were high rates of infant mortality
- The environment was often degraded through the use of dangerous pesticides, burning and soil erosion

In 2005 the village farmers joined a cotton cooperative. This means that their cotton would now be bought at fair trade prices that were significantly higher than the artificially low market rates, and that the farmers would together decide how to invest their income. After join-

1 This story is based on an interview by Rachel Dixon and used by permission. Copyright Guardian News & Media Ltd, 2016

ing the cooperative, they were able to make immense progress. Within the first three years:

- They built a school in the community. At first it had two classrooms. When they had more money and wanted to expand, they challenged the government to match their investment. Now there are five classrooms in total, and every child in the village can go to school
- They built a maternity centre
- They installed a pump for drinking water
- They built a new road, enabling farmers to travel further than 5km outside of the village without difficulty

The commitment and demand of consumers to buy cotton at a fairly traded price coupled with Makandianfing and his community's commitment to justice and flourishing in their community made these developments possible.

The cost of cotton was literally killing Makandianfing's community, but after changes by him, his community and consumers, the value of cotton helped his community flourish.

Every time we consume goods we can perpetuate either the suffering or the flourishing of others.

Possessions Are Not Power by José Marcos da Silva

We live in a world where our attitudes and actions are strongly influenced by cultural models. Often without us realising it. One such cultural model is consumerism, which carries with it the illusion that “possessions are power”. We are led to believe that people are only the sum of what they possess. Clothes, accessories, buildings, cars, electronics, restaurants, hotels: these define who we are. Our buying power and consumption define our identity.

We are encouraged to have as many things as possible, to consume as much as we can and to throw away anything we no longer want. As a result, our lifestyles are now largely unsustainable and require urgent and radical change. With this in mind, let’s pause to ask ourselves: What guidance can the Bible give us on how to approach consumption? What is the relationship between what we own and consume, and our Christian beliefs?

At the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis, God gave us a mandate to steward the earth. However people often want the maximum results from the minimum effort, and this leads to exploitation. This has been particularly obvious in our relationship with God’s creation. We were not made to exploit God’s creation until it no longer exists; we were called to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). We have a spiritual responsibility for God’s creation. Instead of squandering its resources, we must use them carefully and sustainably. This begs some key questions: What can we do to reduce our consumption? Do we really need everything we possess? How can we consume in a way that is more ethical and sustainable?

Another theological concept that must inform our consumption is abundant life or full life. The Greek word that some versions of the Bible translate as “abundant” (an abundant life), is also translated as “full” (a full life). There is a big difference between abundance and fullness: abundance implies more than is necessary, and fullness suggests

harmony. Our lives can only be full when they are in harmony, and this also includes our relationship with what we own and consume.

The ideology that promotes the concept of “the more we own, the more blessed we are by God” has grown in recent times. It has led vast numbers of believers to wanting more and more. **This idea is more closely linked to that of abundance, but actually, the life that Christ means us to have is a “full life”, where we have just enough in order to live in peace (shalom) with God.** How does this work in practice? We may not have an expensive mattress, but we are still able to sleep soundly; we may not live in a mansion, but we still have safe shelter. Jesus reminds us that we should look to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:26-34), so we can comprehend God’s love and desire to bless us. However, without us sharing what we have there are many who aren’t seeing their material needs met, and it is our privilege to work as a channel of blessing to others.

Jesus’ teaching on God vs Mammon (Matthew 6:24) would be a direct challenge to the consumerism of today. Mammon is the Gentile God of riches attained through greed and covetousness. For the love of money, many wander from the faith (1 Timothy 6:10). Throughout the Bible as a whole, there is a tension between the love of money and the love of God. We cannot love both, as they both compete to reign over us, and no man can serve two masters without displeasing one. Accumulating possessions is the widely accepted capitalist culture. It is now so extreme, that only one per cent of the richest people in the world own the same amount as the rest of the population. This is completely unjust! Despite this, it is still considered normal to want as much as possible for ourselves. We focus most of our attention and energy on accumulating and earning more, without realising that this path takes us further from God’s plan, and that the false abundance will only lead to misery.

Another impact of the unrestrained quest for profit at any cost can be seen in the exploitation of workers, driven by the demand from consumers. In much of the business world where the priority is to

make ever-greater profit, there is a toxic tendency to ignore ethical and human principles. The exploitation of labour is a form of slavery. This means that not only is it important for us to consume only what is necessary, but that it is also important for us to think about the origins of what we buy.

What are the practical implications of these scriptural values for us here today?

If we want to be disciples of Christ, we must try to imitate him. Jesus was a humble servant. He was holy and lived a radically simple life. These three characteristics are profoundly entwined, and they should underlie our discipleship.

Someone once said that “wisdom is learning to love people and use things”. The opposite is destructive. If we love things and use people, we cause pain and destruction. The things we have should be at the service of our neighbours, and never the contrary.

Our priority should not be to accumulate things, as this can destroy both us and God’s creation. Possessions are not power. Giving is power! Generosity is essential. This Christian model is one that in many places the world has forgotten, and if we can embrace it in our own attitudes, we will honour Christ.

If we can consider the relationship between buying and consuming in the light of these values, everything else will follow naturally. We will take care of nature because that is our role, and its restoration is part of the plan of salvation (Romans 8:19-25); we will consume fewer things more responsibly; we will not rush off in search of wealth, because the love of riches distances us from God. We will lead simple lives, as we seek to follow and imitate Jesus.

Read Jeremiah 22:13-17 Together

- 13 “Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness,
his upper rooms by injustice,
making his own people work for nothing,
not paying them for their labor.
- 14 He says, ‘I will build myself a great palace
with spacious upper rooms.’
So he makes large windows in it,
panels it with cedar
and decorates it in red.
- 15 Does it make you a king
to have more and more cedar?
Did not your father have food and drink?
He did what was right and just,
so all went well with him.
- 16 He defended the cause of the poor and needy,
and so all went well.
Is that not what it means to know me?”
declares the Lord.
- 17 “But your eyes and your heart
are set only on dishonest gain,
on shedding innocent blood
and on oppression and extortion.”

Questions for Discussion

1. What specific acts or situations of injustice are found in this passage?
2. Contrast the two kinds mentioned in the Jeremiah passage. What was the problem with the son's wealth?
3. Do you know who/what sustains your lifestyle? Share with the group about one way you try to seek justice with your consumption.
4. What is God saying to you, and what are you going to do about it?

Together

One way we can ensure our consumption is not contributing to the suffering of others is by: **reducing** the amount of goods we buy, **reusing** those goods we can through repair and repurposing and **recycling** goods that we cannot reuse. By doing so we reduce waste, lower the demand for cheap, unjustly produced goods and also resist the prevailing culture that puts too much value on material things as a source of satisfaction. Some of us live this way by choice, and others of us do this out of economic necessity. Now is your chance to share with your group your clever ideas! What is one way you and your family have reused or recycled items and, in turn, reduced consumption?

Solo Work

Research one product that you buy often. Find out how the company that produces it treats its employees. Try to research the supply chain: how are those who made or grew the product treated?

- Does this influence your desire to continue buying goods from this company? How can you buy from more justice oriented companies? Come prepared to share your findings with the group
- Add a “consumption” piece to your action plan. Make it specific. How can you live more simply? How can you buy more ethically? Maybe commit to buy from a local company that you know treats its employees well. Maybe commit to only buy fair trade coffee or used clothing. Pick one thing you can make actionable and embrace it for the long haul!
- Continue work on your creative expression and find one person to share your thoughts, ideas and even your project with, to get feedback and to help you create coherently

Prayer

Lord, forgive me for the times I consume goods selfishly or unwisely, without regard for my impact on others. Help me to be aware of how I consume on a daily basis and how I can promote the flourishing of others through my choices. Help me to live justly in the area of consumption. Not as a pharisee seeking to keep the “justice” laws, but rather as an act of worship towards you.

END

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