

Consumerism

1. Introduction

- We're currently doing a 3 week series on Gospel and Culture
 - That is, we want to see where the good news of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection ... speaks into and intersects with our cultural worldview
 - Reason I want us to do this ... is because like a fish swimming in the sea, we are so often unaware of the culture we live in.
 - Similarly, like a frog being boiled alive in a pot we're often oblivious what's going on around us, unless we are able to stand back and critique with curiosity, discernment and wisdom the world around us and the culture we live in.
 - To do that, we need something or someone from outside our culture to help us reflect and discern, and where necessary, realign our thinking and actions.
- Last we looked at the issue of euthanasia > next week we are looking at depression and anxiety > today we are considering consumerism
- And each week our aim is to hear from God on these issues – the one who stands above our culture and can speak into it with objectivity, clarity and wisdom.
- Today
 - Culture of consumerism
 - Problem of consumerism
 - Solution to consumerism

2. The Culture of Consumerism

- Consumerism is a social and economic philosophy that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts
- Since the 1800s and the Industrial Revolution the world has been consuming at a higher rate than ever
 - This is because the Industrial Revolution allowed products to be produced in enormous quantities for the first time in history
 - Which means products were made at previously unheard-of low cost ... meaning these products were now available to a far greater proportion of the population than ever before
 - This sudden increase in access to affordable mass-produced products led to the era of mass consumption

- However, an even great shift took place after WWII in the US, when factories that had previously been producing weapons suddenly lay idle, and soldiers were returning from war with no jobs to go to
 - American economists and the government of the day determined they needed to revive the economy ... and the way they proposed to do that was to stimulate increased consumer spending

- The economist, retail analyst and author, Victor Lebow wrote a paper in 1955 paper, called 'Price Competition in 1955' which sheds light on this
 - *"Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency. We require not only "forced draft" consumption, but "expensive" consumption as well. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption."*

- How do you stimulate consumers to spend like this? Advertising!
- And what's the purpose of advertising?
 - Basically, advertising aims to create within us a discontentment with what we have ... and convince us that we'd be happier, and life would be better if we had their product
- Victor Lebow confirmed this when he wrote
 - *What becomes clear is that from the larger viewpoint of our economy, the total effect of all the advertising and promotion and selling is to create and maintain the **multiplicity and intensity of wants** that are the spur to the standard of living in the United States. A specific advertising and promotional campaign, for a particular product at a particular time, has no automatic guarantee of success, yet it may contribute **to the general pressure by which wants are stimulated and maintained.***

- Advertising and marketing is designed to arouse in us a want of things and build pressure on us to buy them
 - We consume primarily because advertisements tell us to, rather than because we need to

- And so what Lebow and his peers did was 'create' the modern advertising industry which seeks to make us feel insecure and discontent by creating a sense of self-worth that is based on the possessions we have
- Lebow confirms this in his paper ...
 - *The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today is expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats, his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies*
- It's estimated that each of us are targeted with over 3,000 advertisements a day
 - As a result, we see more ads in a year, than people 50 years ago saw in a life time
 - And the point of those ads is to make us unhappy with what we have
 - To make us discontent with what we have
 - And so 3,000 times a day we are told our ...
 - Hair is wrong
 - Skin is wrong
 - Clothes are wrong
 - Phone is wrong
 - Car is wrong
 - We are wrong
 - But it can all be made right we just go shopping and 'consume' their product
- And so what has evolved over the last 70 years ... is this culture of consumerism
- Here's some of the ways we see consumerism playing out in today's world
- When Apple releases the latest version of the iPhone and hundreds of people line up overnight outside the store to be the first ones in to buy it
 - On Sept 21 this year ... Mazen Kourouche spent the night outside the Apple store in George St to ensure he was at the front of the line get the latest iPhone release
 - It's the fifth time he's lined up outside the store for a new product and third time he's been front of the queue
- He said

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- *"For the iPhone 8, I had a couple of my mates helping me out ... because I lined up for 11 days"*
 - You and I may not line up outside the Apple Store overnight for the latest iPhone release, but we're pretty keen to upgrade our phones every two years with our mobile phone company even though our current phone is perfectly fine

 - How often do we buy clothes that get worn for a season and left to hang in our closets ... only to be bagged up, taken to the charity shop and replaced by new ones?
 - Evolution of a cyclist confirms this is a reality!
 - Upgrading bikes, components, clothing, and accessories

 - In addition, our consumerism has led to the culture of buy now pay later
 - We're so desperate to have stuff ... we're willing to rack up the debt in order to get it
 - Whether
 - Spending on our credit cards
 - Using Harvey Norman's buy now, pay later option
 - Australians have over \$33bn in unpaid credit card debt ... that's up from ~\$5bn in 2000
 - That's an average of over \$2,000 per card ... and many Australians have more than one card
 - Consumerism influences not just through marketing and advertising, but also through lifestyle shows like ...
 - Better Homes and Gardens, The Block, Renovation Rescue & House Rules
 - Of course these shows are really just 60 mins advertisements for Bunnings, Mitre 10, Flower Power, Suzuki and the Good Guys through their product placements
 - And us Aussies lap it all up ... and all the while its feeding our desire to renovate our homes look like those we see on TV

 - It was interesting talking to Mike Taylor (CMS Missionary) when he was back here recently
 - I asked him what was the biggest cultural difference he noticed coming back to Australia from Tanzania
 - He said
 - Australians seem unwilling to sacrifice for the gospel
 - They see something they want ... and they just go and buy it
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3. The Problem of Consumerism

- There are number of problems to this ... I want to focus on three
 - Makes us blind
 - Makes us greedy
 - Makes us discontent

Blindness

- The first thing we need realise about consumerism is just how blind we are to it
- We are so surrounded by our consumerist culture we cannot see the culture we're swimming in
 - We just see it as normal
 - It's just part of the air we breathe that we're oblivious to
- We see many others in our neighbourhood, peer group, work places who have more money than us, or spending on things we don't have that we'd like
- But we don't compare ourselves to
 - the rest of the world; or
 - those in lower socio-economic groups than us; or
 - where we use to be materially 5 or 10 years ago ...
- Instead ... we compare ourselves to
 - those around us who have more
 - those above us on socio-economic scale
- And we don't realise we are doing it because we think to ourselves,
 - "I don't live as well as him or her or them. My lifestyle and spending is modest compared to them."
- We can reason and think like that no matter how lavish a life you are living ... whether you are living in Mortdale or Mosman, Campbelltown or Coogee
- And so we just do think it's a problem for us
 - We don't think of ourselves as greedy
 - We don't think we're particularly consumeristic
- Pastor Tim Keller
 - "As a pastor I've had people come to me to confess that they struggle with almost every sin. I cannot recall anyone ever coming to me and saying "I spend too much money on myself. I think my greedy lust for money is harming my family, my soul and people around me."

- Given our blindness to it ... we should all begin with the working hypothesis that this could easily be a problem for me
- If greed hides itself so deeply ... none of us should be confident that it's not a problem for me

Greed

- The second problem with consumerism is it makes us greedy
 - It cultivates desires and wants within us to want what we don't have
- Our culture doesn't really think greed is an issue
 - If you were to hear someone speaking against greed would probably be a parent rebuking their kid for taking a third piece of chocolate cake
- But the NT says greed is a much bigger issue
 - Matt 6:24 – Jesus portrayed wealth and possessions as a master that rivals God
 - “You cannot serve two masters, for either he will hate one and love the other ... you cannot serve both God and money”
 - 1 Tim 6:10-11
 - Love of money is a root of all kinds of evil
 - For what is often at the heart of crime, gambling, workaholism, pollution, and social poverty
 - To a certain extent greed can take a share of the credit
 - And therefore, we are to flee from it
- Worst of all ... greed is a form of idolatry
 - Eph 5:5 – greedy person is an idolater
 - Col 3:5 – greed is idolatry and we need to kill it
- You see God is very astute here
 - Greed is not the core of the issue
 - It's actually idolatry
 - That is ... there's something that we love and desire so deeply, and so badly, that it displays itself in greedy ways
- Our consumeristic culture cultivates these desires in the heart that become our idols
- But we need to remember that the things we're consuming aren't the real idols
 - The real idols are deep in our heart that we satisfy with the things we buy
- Tim Keller refers to these as near idols and deep idols

- Near idols are things like – wealth, career, family, body image, exam marks, material possessions etc
- Deep idols are more profound. Keller says there are four
 - Power & Influence
 - Approval & Appreciation
 - Emotional and Physical Comfort
 - Security & Control
- We desire these deep idols of the heart and we use near idols to satisfy them
 - So I want the
 - New suit because it helps satisfy my desire for power
 - New iPhone because it satisfies my idol of peer approval
 - New renovation because fulfils my need for comfort
 - Top of the range product because makes me feel more secure
- Anything you look to more than Jesus Christ for a sense of acceptability, joy, significance, hope, and security is by definition your 'god'
- If you're willing to
 - spend without thought
 - unable to give up spending on a certain thing ...
 - then that thing is probably satisfying an idol of the heart that you need get rid of
- The other problem is when you have an idol of the heart being fed by consumeristic greed ... is it enslaves you
 - We become so captured by the need to fulfil this desire of the heart ... that we become like addicts ... we can't help but buy the thing that satisfies and fulfils us
 - We become slaves to it
- And so my desire for approval means I will always be wanting to have
 - the newest technology
 - nicest house on the street
 - fashionable wardrobe
 - latest release
- We're compelled to consume to satisfy those things that have captured the affections of our heart

Discontent

- The third problem of consumerism is it makes us discontent
 - That's the whole purpose of advertising and marketing

- To make you discontent with what you have ... so that you'll want to go out and buy their product in the belief it will satisfy you and make you happy
- Life in consumeristic society is therefore destined to be a life where discontent is constant companion
 - As a result we end up ruining the good we do have ... by not being satisfied with it and wanting more
- We are like the child who climbs a hill and sees a higher one in the distance and thinks from there it will be possible to touch the clouds
- Once on top of the hill we discover that we are just as far from the clouds as before
- Virtually no one is satisfied with he or she has
 - Few of us are willingly forgo what we can afford
 - Enough is always just over the horizon and the yet the horizon always seems to recede as we approach it
- To switch metaphors ...
 - We're like caged mice running furiously in the wheel getting nowhere
 - We are always trying to achieve, in a never-ending cycle of wanting and having, thinking this will lead us to lasting happiness
- But in the end, we're left unsatisfied, discontent and unhappy

4. The Solution of Consumerism

- The solution to consumerism is the biblical idea of contentment
 - If we can learn contentment ... then we can begin swim against the tide of our consumeristic culture
- Paul says in in 1 Tim 6
 - *⁶ But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*
- In the verses prior to this the Apostle Paul has been warning Timothy about false teachers who think that being preachers and teachers is a means to financial gain
 - They have no interest in godliness itself, but only if it proves to be financially profitable

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- But Paul says real gain, real success, real satisfaction is found when you combine godliness with contentment
 - And he reminds Timothy of a truth we all know as humans but continually forget ... that we *brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.*
 - And therefore ... if we have our basics needs in life then we can be content

 - How is it we can be content with just the basics in life?
 - This is where Paul's reference to godliness comes in
 - We need a God-centred perspective for this to work

 - Paul makes the point in his letter to the Philippians
 - In Ch 3 Paul describes his impeccable personal credentials
 - He is
 - Of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews
 - In regard to the law, a Pharisee;
 - Then he says in v7-8
 - ⁷ *But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.* ⁸ *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,*

 - Compared to the treasure that is knowing Christ ... or being known by Christ ... everything else is secondary
 - Christ has made Paul his own ... and so forgetting that lies behind Paul presses and strains toward the goal of his citizenship in heaven

 - In Phil 4:11-12 Paul goes on to say
 - *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.* ¹² *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.*

 - Paul's able to be content ... because what he has as a follower of Jesus is far greater regardless of the situation he finds himself in
 - And therefore, the peace with God he has through Jesus and his death and resurrection, dispels any discontentment he would otherwise experience, and replaces it with joy, and contentment, whatever the circumstances may be

 - But the question remains ... how do you learn to be content?
 - How do you deal with those wants and desires that our consumeristic culture cultivate in our heart which are the ultimate source of our discontent
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- Answer comes from Col 3:5
 - Got to put to death the idols of our heart
 - Those things we desire and crave for and are constantly needing to be satisfied ... need to be put the death

- But dealing with the idols of our heart is not easy
 - You can't simply put them to death by getting rid of greed or discontent
 - I can't just say that
 - my consumeristic desires need to be reigned in
 - I need to change
 - I must try harder
 - I must not let this thing control me
 - I need to stop and live differently

- Direct appeals to the will like this wont work because the deep idols need to be dealt with at the heart level

- There is only one way to change at the heart level and that is through faith in the gospel

- What does the gospel teach us?
 - That Jesus Christ ... left his heavenly throne, became like one of his creation
 - And not just a man but a slave
 - And willingly suffered on the cross in our place to pay the price of sin we deserve to pay
 - So that we might become co-heirs with him in eternity

- In other words ... to borrow from Paul in Phil 3 ...
 - Jesus Christ *considered everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing you and me*
 - He gave up everything ... so he could gain you!

- You can't just kill off, get rid of and ignore your idol
 - You need to replace it with something else
 - You need to have something else that your heart loves more that will drive your desires, wants, and behaviour
 - And that of course is Jesus

- And when Jesus is the one you love more than anything else ... then like Paul, you **can** be content with the basics in life, because in Christ you have something even greater

- **Illustration – Andrew Carnegie**

- In his day, Andrew Carnegie's steel company made him one of the wealthiest men in the world
- Early on in his success at only 33 years of age, he took a ruthless evaluation of his own heart and produced a 'note to self' ...
 - *"Man must have an idol - the amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry. No idol is more debasing than the worship of money. Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately therefore I should be careful to choose the life which will be the most elevating in character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery. I will resign business at 35 but during the ensuing two years I wish to spend the afternoons in securing instruction and in reading systematically."*
- In the end Carnegie didn't resign his business two years later as stated, and many of the character effects he feared worked out in his life
 - Although Carnegie gave away lots of money and built over 2,000 libraries, he was known for underpaying his workers, forcing them to work back breaking shifts in the steelworks, in poor conditions and with sub-standard housing
- Carnegie knew that money was an idol in his heart ... but he didn't know how to root it out
 - Our idols **can't** be removed, they can only be replaced
 - Whatever it is you and I ... it must be supplanted by the one who gave up all he had so that we might be his
 - The one who was content to die ... so you might have everything

- **Application**

- What happens when Christ frees you from your idols and enables you to become a person of contentment
- Firstly, it frees you from constantly spending ... because you no longer feel like you have to keep up with everyone else in order to be socially acceptable
 - Because in Christ you don't need the approval of others anymore, because you have the approval of the one who matters ... your Father in heaven
- Secondly, it frees you from the false messages and lies of our advertisers that tell you explicitly or implicitly that you are somehow deficient without their product
 - Because in Christ, you know you are a child of God who is deeply loved, and valued just as you are ... and your

- Clothes
- Hair
- House
- Car
- Gadgets
- Are immaterial to God
- For the sum of your possessions is not what matters ... its being known by Jesus that matters

- Thirdly, being freed from your idols and becoming a person of contentment, frees you to be generous with your money toward God and his kingdom
 - Because in Christ, you know you have all the riches of heaven awaiting you ... that even if you were to have the whole world, it is nothing to count it as loss compared to the surpassing riches of knowing Christ

PRAY