

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The relevance of God in 2008: Christianity and Consumerism

Consumerism is a word we are well acquainted with but do we know exactly what it means? The dictionary we have at home defines consumerism as:

- *“the protection of the interests of buyers of goods and services against defective or dangerous goods, etc; and,*
- *the theory that steady growth in the consumption of goods is necessary for a sound economy.”*

We probably all thought that it just meant people buying too much and that is, in fact, what we shall be looking at today but the two dictionary definitions are not irrelevant. It is true that the Bible does not really say anything about taking back to the shop a vacuum cleaner that won't work but we do read in Proverbs 11:1, “Dishonest scales are an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight.” In the Law that God gave through Moses, the Israelites were told in Leviticus 19:35-36, “You shall do no injustice in judgment, in measurement of length, weight or volume. You shall have honest scales, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” This was to prevent a merchant from using a light weight when he was buying, which would have given him more, and a heavy weight when selling, which would have given the customer less. In the UK today, we have Weights and Measures inspectors who check that, for example, scales are accurate and that the customer gets as much as the retailer claims. We should be grateful that when the packet says “one kilo,” that's what you get. And when shopping in a market, the stallholders' scales are accurate.

Now we come on to the second definition, the theory that steady growth in the consumption of goods is necessary for a sound economy. You will have noticed that it has been every British government's policy for a long time that there should be economic growth. This view is shared, as far as I am aware, by virtually every other government the world around. It has the virtue of being one of the few government policies that everyone supports, regardless of political party, outlook on life, race, religion, age, or any other type or definition of person. It's what nearly everyone seems to assume is the only way, mostly perhaps because the alternative is a run down in the economy. The result of a rundown that will hit us all is increased unemployment and we all want to avoid that. Only very few have queried this view that growth is good but there have always been some and their number seems to be growing now. The way this policy is pursued is by encouraging the retail trade. Or, to put it another way, getting the general public - you, me and everyone else - to go out and buy more. The latest figures on how much the shops are selling are eagerly and fearfully awaited, both for the country as a whole and for individual businesses. If we spend less in the shops, it's bad news for the staff, the shareholders, the haulage firms, the suppliers and manufacturers of all these things and the government too because they will receive lower tax revenues and have to spend more on supporting a larger number of unemployed people. They will then have less money to spend on all the things we want like new schools, better transport, improved health treatment and all the myriad of things we think the government should do something about. And so it's bad news for all of us, especially if it's our job that goes.

So does consumerism sound like the right thing to do? Well, perhaps not. It's based on greed. Greed, we all acknowledge, is a bad thing. Full stop. Well, most of us believe that greed is bad but every now and then you hear of someone who says that greed is good because it stimulates economic growth. It's certainly what keeps the world's economic system going. However, people are beginning to see that constant growth will not work and must come to grief sometime. We have experience of that at the moment. The desire for more money and the encouragement of debts which people could not possibly repay has, as we speak, nearly brought the world's banking system crashing down. It is unlikely to come to that now but one day it will collapse.

Even without the current crisis, we have to reckon with the fact that the world would have to be five times bigger than it is if everyone on this planet had the same standard of living as Americans have, and be three times bigger if everyone lived as Europeans do. This is plainly unsustainable. Dire warnings come out and get some publicity and there was even a book about the problem published a year or two ago called “Affluenza” as though affluence was a disease. But it doesn't seem to make any difference. In any case, any suggestions for change which these well-meaning people make are only the thoughts of sinful men and they do not necessarily reflect God's thoughts nor are the suggestions meant in any way to glorify God. And glorifying God is surely what every Christian wants to do.

What does the Bible say? Well, it says quite a lot about money and possessions and how to handle them. Have a look through Luke's Gospel, for instance, and see how many times the Lord Jesus mentions money, possessions, riches, poverty, and debts. These are in nearly every chapter and in many of the parables. Christianity is not some airy-fairy philosophy with its head in the clouds and of no practical value. Not at all. It is a fact that our true treasures are in heaven but Christianity is very much concerned with the here and now, how we conduct our everyday lives and how we take the hard decisions, and these often involve decisions on how we spend our money.

Let's see what the Bible says then. In Luke 12, the Lord tells the parable of the rich fool, a man whose fields had yielded plentiful crops. He asked himself what to do with all these crops and decided to build bigger barns to put them in and to take his ease for the rest of his life. To us, he sounds like the very successful person so many people want to be but the Lord Jesus tells us that God said to him, "You fool, this night your soul will be required of you, then whose will those things be which you have provided?" And the Lord added, "So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God." He then went on to show that life itself is more important than food and that the body is more important than clothing. If God can feed ravens and can clothe wild lilies, how much more can He provide for His people? We are not to worry - that's what the rest, the unbelievers, do - our Father knows what we need and we are to trust Him. We find where our real aim should be in the next words which the Lord Jesus spoke on that occasion:

"But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give to you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also". And those words are found in Luke 12:31-34.

This is what happens when we follow the words of the Lord Jesus; all the practical details of our lives catered for by God our Father, and an eternal treasure which cannot be touched by the troubles of this life - not only safe from theft and deterioration (the moth that the Lord mentions) but also our eternal treasure is safe from inflation, rises in the price of oil, bank collapses, the credit crunch, the reduction in the value of housing and all the other things which can if not actually ruin us, then make life very difficult and precarious. God's promises are surely better than any guarantee a government can make. And as the rich fool in the parable found out, being rich does not necessarily ensure that you live longer.

More than that, God's promises have no unfortunate side effects, no unforeseen and unhappy results, and there is no small print with some nasty surprises.

On the other hand, what does consumerism lead to? What is the result of encouraging the greed which so many of us seem to have been born with and which typifies the society in which we live? What happens when we join in the quest for growth? If your house or flat is like ours, it's not very big. There's no room for bigger and better things, especially in the kitchen. We don't need two cookers, two washing machines, or two baths. We could, however, be easily persuaded to buy new ones, and not just a new cooker but a whole new kitchen, new bathroom, new furniture and the rest. We have nowhere to park another car but we could buy another one, bigger, with even more extras on it and able to go much faster than any road in Britain will legally allow. If we could afford it. But we don't have to be able to afford it! We can use our credit card, eagerly given to us by a bank or some other financial institution which, we are told, will not check whether we can afford the repayments nor even whether we have run up debts with another credit card company. If you can cast your mind back far enough, you may remember that one of the first credit cards was called Access. My wife called it the Excess card and we didn't have one. It promised access to all the things you wanted but didn't have but, of course, excess was a more accurate description. The unhappy results of this excess are too well known by us all for me to have to repeat them. The almost unbelievable levels of debt in this country are the result of foolishness and encouraged debt. Well, the bubble has burst and where it will lead we do not yet know but I have no doubt that this is all part of the lead up, the setting of the scene for the Great Tribulation, when God's wrath, so richly deserved, will finally burst out on mankind and all humanity's chickens will finally come home to roost.

If I do follow the Government's and business' wishes, what will happen? I shall go out shopping or surf the internet for sites selling things, and order something. If they're clothes, I'll take them home with me but the furniture and white goods will duly trundle up on a white van in a few days and deliver my order. The things will be squeezed into whatever room they're intended for and switched on or sat on or slept on. For fridges, cookers, boilers etc, insurance will be recommended. That's more money out each month. In 10-15 years they will be replaced. The old ones will be carted off somewhere, I don't know where but out of sight and definitely out of mind. The recyclable bits will be recycled (we hope, we don't know for sure) and the unrecycled bits will be incinerated or dumped in a landfill site.

This process causes considerable problems which we are all familiar with, from the large lorries on the motorways, and the white vans blocking the streets where they are delivering, to the exhortations from local councils and other well-intentioned people to use less and recycle more, coupled now with the different-coloured bins issued by your council for different sorts of waste. If you are not inclined to take all this seriously, there's the £200 fine for putting your waste in the wrong bin.

But the relentless drive for growth continues. We are told that the country is running out of landfill sites, that the EU's rules mean that the use of landfill sites will have to be drastically reduced, no one wants incinerators, that the peak for oil production will soon arrive or has arrived already, that the world's food production is facing serious problems and the usual bad news about deforestation. But, as far as I can see, it's still business as usual. No one in a position to act is really doing much about it, although they talk about it a lot. The adverts in magazines, on the television and by the roadside still urge us to buy products that are supposed to make us happy by owning them, having them on our faces, on our bodies or driving them. They even try and make us want to be the kind of person shown in the advert - the person who is wealthy enough, has exquisite cultivated taste, powerful, healthy, sporty, sensible or whatever the advertiser thinks will attract our attention enough to extract the money from our wallets. A friend of mine had a neighbour who bought a quite small but very expensive car. He had nowhere to park it except outside his front door in a very narrow congested London street and nowhere to exploit its quite phenomenal and illegal top speed. My friend remarked that his neighbour just wanted to feel like the kind of man who owned one of these cars. It is true that the 4x4 mentality is beginning to go but we still have 4x4-size helpings on our plates and the amount of food wasted is truly amazing.

We are told that London needs to grow in order to preserve its position as one of the world's leading financial centres. Without it, the rest of the country would find things very difficult. This does not just mean more houses and more traffic jams in London; it also means more sewage, not the sort of thing we want to think about. But we haven't much choice because it is already too much for the existing system to handle, especially when there is heavy rain and, as a result, raw sewage flows into the Thames on occasions. It can only get worse. Fish in the Thames were increasing but are now decreasing and boats can get seriously fouled up. There are already plans to deal with this but the estimated cost runs into the billions and will doubtless cost twice as much as the current estimate by the time the scheme is finished, assuming it ever actually starts.

I could continue this theme; you'll be glad to hear that I won't. We've got a long way from God's Word, the Bible. And that is to some extent my point. We live in a world which runs itself without any real reference to the one true God. Its god is Satan, the ruler of this world, as the Lord Jesus says in John chapter 14, verse 30. We need look no further than Satan to see the cause of humanity's problems. His demonic input, coupled with our greed and the inability to say, "No," and to stop, are the reasons why we are where we are. The real point of this talk is to ask, "How should Christians live in this situation?"

It is far easier for us to go with the flow and behave the same as the rest. It's very difficult to stop and get off, so to speak. But do we really need yet more electronic gizmos and more ornaments on the mantelpiece? The world's way is always the easiest way and, humanly speaking, it can be the most reasonable. Nobody objects to our behaving like the rest of society and even some Christians may think we're a bit odd if we step aside from the world's usual practice of spending up to our level of income and even beyond it. Yet do something we must. The world's way has always been wrong - the world's way led to the crucifixion of our Lord, after all - but its ways do seem particularly perverse now in their folly and in the irreparable harm they are doing to the environment, to the globe's limited resources and to people. For the mad dash for more and more leads to gross evils in employment practices, business dealings, and unfair trade agreements as well as the other problems we hear more about.

What more does the Bible tell us about these things? In the Book of Revelation, chapter 6, we read of what are popularly called the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The third of the horsemen was on a black horse and had a pair of scales in his hand. A voice in heaven said, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine." In other words, a time is coming when the basic necessities of life will be very expensive (it has been calculated that these prices were eight times above the normal in the days of the Apostle John, the writer of the Revelation).

Later on in Revelation, in chapter 18, we read of the fall of Babylon the great. It will be an utter disaster, not just for Babylon itself but for all those who traded with her. The goods of these merchants are listed - gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine cloths, woods, ivory, metals, marble and on the list goes and at the very end, alas, the bodies and souls of men. So while there will be famine for the poor, the rich will still be enjoying amazing luxuries until the moment of Babylon's collapse. Just before the downfall of Babylon, a voice from heaven speaks to those of God's people still on the earth, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues." Now this time is not yet here by any means but I feel the principle still applies to Christians in our day. We are living in the world which crucified our Saviour. We are living in a world that God is going to judge and in a society that He will destroy. Do we really want to be part of it, even if the really serious judgements have not yet started? Can we not think hard, before the Lord, about our involvement in this particular aspect of this world's activities?

We are not to be foolish. We have to thread our way through these things without being eccentric or extreme. We are not called upon to withdraw so much that we no longer live amongst other people. In the UK, we cannot live as though we are in a Third World shanty town or in a mud hut; the authorities would not permit it, for a start. Our homes have to

be maintained properly. What is old or broken needs replacement. For weddings etc which we are invited to, we may need to splash out a bit but there is a limit and we need to remember that we shall one day have to render an account to the Lord Himself of how we have handled the money and possessions which God has given us.

If we do not handle money the world's way, we shall have so much more to give to support the Lord's work, whether it's supporting evangelism or the poor or whatever sphere of service God draws our attention to.

Let's hear some more words from the Bible. These come from 1 Timothy, 6:6-11, and 17-19: "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us all things richly to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life".

See how much better are God's alternatives to this world's greedy madness. Let us pursue them.

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