

I. Introduction

A. How much stuff do we need? How much stuff will make us happy? How much of life is lost because our thoughts are hijacked by someone telling us we need more stuff – in particular, the stuff they are selling?

B. We've slowed our march through Exodus to reflect on the topic of idols. We are three fourths of the way through the book – the first half of which is about getting the Jews out of Egypt. We are in the second half where the goal is to get Egypt out of the Jews.

1. That's perhaps more clever than accurate. The goal is less to get Egypt out of their heart and head than it is to get God in. To rightly love and honor God. To rightly order our loves and fears. We want to know how they do this because we want to do this ourselves.

2. Of course, in order for God to fully occupy, room has to be made. Other things – small “g” gods – have to be pushed aside. That is what we are thinking about.

3. The problem for the Jews was a golden calf. While Moses had been up the mountain talking with God, Aaron had bowed to popular pressure and made a golden calf idol. We are too sophisticated for that. Not by much – and given the trajectory of culture, perhaps not for long. So, this series is does not say – get rid of any golden calves or jade statues you are praying to. And instead it is looking at some of the good things we allow to become ultimate things. We are thinking about aspects of creation that we allow to occupy the spot reserved for the Creator.

4. Last week we looked at self and self-esteem. Next week it is sex. We will take up entertainment and patriotism. Today it's money – or, to be more specific, it's the things money can buy.

C. Money is a common idol. Jesus says as much. When He speaks about it in the Sermon on the Mount, he capitalizes the M, calls it Mammon and describes it as a force few can handle. He says:

1. **Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

2. And then later: **No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.**

3. In 1 Timothy 6 Paul expounds on this, noting that **The love of money is the root of all kinds of problems.**

4. And the Bible is full of stories about those who are upended by it. The rich young ruler and Lazarus being two of the many.

D. Let me note, the term money is a place holder for several things. We are not in love with the pieces of paper. But there are several ways money can get us into trouble.

1. We can place our trust in it – thinking we are safe because we have enough money. Rather than placing our trust in God and his providential care and goodness.

2. Or we can allow money to lead to pride – if we have more than someone we might feel that we are better than they are.

3. Or we can use money – God’s money (it’s always God’s money) to control others in ways that are not honoring to God or to the others. And which is destructive to us – it corrupts our soul.

4. Or we can allow it to fuel greed. We simply spend God’s money on ourselves. Timothy Keller points out in his book *Counterfeit Gods*. He notes that greed is one of those sins that doesn’t jump out at you. He says this: Some years ago I was doing a seven-part series of talks on the Seven Deadly Sins at a men’s breakfast. My wife told me “I’ll bet that the week you deal with greed you will have your lowest attendance.” She was right. People packed it out for Lust and Wrath and even Pride. But nobody thinks they are greedy. As a pastor I’ve had people come to me to confess that they struggle with almost every kind of sin. Almost. 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. Greed hides itself from the victim. Its MO includes blindness to your own heart.

II. For what it’s worth, I thought about talking about the idolatry of the market. Of democratic capitalism itself, thereby removing any doubts some of you have about my economics. Sparking dozens of conversations on the ride home, all beginning with the line, “I told you he was a communist!” I’m not.

A. I believe that democratic capitalism – the system of exchange of goods and services on an open market – is not only the best option we have, but that it has been a force for good in this world.¹

B. And I developed that in my sermon notes for those of you who want to reflect on this.²

C. I think capitalism is our best option in a broken world, but it is not without problems, and it only sort of works if people are shaped by Christian compassion.³

1. It is good at creating wealth – which can be used to feed the hungry, build hospitals and schools, plant churches and all manner of good things – but the market is nothing more than the collective results of a lot of sinful people. The market is not God, and I get really nervous when I hear people say things like, “well, we need to let the market decide.” Or “we need to see what the market will bear.”
2. We can say that capitalism is good and that it’s not a great idea to pay professional athletes 100 times more than we pay school teachers.
3. Capitalism is better than other options, but it leaves many people poor, and it promotes individualism.⁴

D. I entertained the idea of identifying the idol as the market. But I decided to talk about the idolatry of consumerism instead because I think it captures an under-appreciated challenge.

1. You and I are up against the gods of materialism and consumerism - and we are also up against the onslaught of marketing.
2. We need to understand what is going on. We need to see how this moment is unique. Full of good and full of bad, but in many ways – different than before.

E. Let me make three points:

III. Point number one: the Bible is not anti-materialist.

A. There are pure materialists out there. Those who say – what you see is all you get. There is no spiritual reality.

1. Carl Sagan gave us the materialists creed. “The cosmos is all there is and all there was and all there ever will be.”
 - a) This was not and is not a scientific fact. It is a statement of faith. And as statements of faith it is losing market share.
 - (1) Religion is growing. Europe will be religious again soon – although mostly because of the growth of Islam.
 - (2) But, people have a god-shaped vacuum in their heart and it needs to be filled. And so many are filling it. We are always searching for meaning. And many believe that there is more to the world – and to them – than what can be touched.

2. That said, there are some who say the physical world is all there is.

B. There are others who think of the physical world as bad.

1. Some of the Greeks said as much. And their thinking polluted the early church. We call this Gnosticism.

a) It was an early heresy - an anti-materialist heresy. Some claimed Jesus was god but not a man, because the material world is bad.

b) John opens his first letter to speak against this. **That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.**

2. And Gnosticism is making a comeback outside the church.

a) This week Ben and I went to Indianapolis for some Lakelight events – and we took advantage of the trip to meet with a foundation there which makes strategic investments in things it will promote health in society – and it is one of the few foundations that invests pretty openly in the church.

b) And the program director we met with spoke about a Silicon Valley tech guru he heard talking about transhumanism – this idea that we will eventually be able to download our personality and memory onto a hard drive so we can live forever – and he rightly recognized this as Gnosticism and noted that it was a problem and that the early church had had to deal with it.

C. There are those who think what you see is all there is. And those who say that what you see is bad. What the Bible says is: the physical world was created good but is broken. To cite Paul from Romans 8, that all of creation groans under the effects of sin.

1. The physical world is not inherently bad, but it is broken. And – and! - it is not all there is.

2. I recently read a graphic novel – my first – in which the angels marvel at the way humans do not appreciate their bodies. Do not walk barefoot in the grass or eat a mango and marvel at the taste. The angels lack bodies, so they try to enter the world via A.I. enhanced robots. I bought the book for one of my boys for Christmas. He read it and gave it back for me to read. And I read it and learned – among other things – that I am not a graphic novel guy.

D. All of that to say – the material world is important but not perfect and not all there is. So – you can see where I am going – using money to buy and appreciate stuff, is not bad. We are material beings and we need some stuff.

IV. But – point two - we cannot expect it to give us ultimate meaning. And that is a temptation. Indeed, we are living in a moment where many people – including those who say there is a spiritual reality – live as if what you see is all you get. And one of the ways this plays out is that there is a lot of focus on stuff.

A. Buying stuff and thinking about stuff and thinking about buying stuff.

B. Indeed, one of the things that has happened today is that lots of our life is given over to people thinking about stuff – it used to be window shopping, now it's scrolling. And they buy into the idea that if they had more stuff they would be happy.⁵ And this is simply not true.

C. One of the reasons I decided to highlight the idol of consumerism is because one of the ways our lives are different from those living 200 years ago – and even 100 years ago – is the amount of ads we are surrounded by. We are swimming in waters in which people are trying to get us to buy their stuff.

1. In the early 1800s, individuals might encounter a few advertisements per week, mainly through newspapers or word-of-mouth.
2. With the spread of the radio in the early 1900s, exposure to advertising increased slightly, but still remained minimal.
3. With the rise of television, the floodgates opened. By the end of the 20th century, the average American was encountering 4,000 ads per day.⁶
4. And now there are more – and they are really good. Smart people wake up every day trying to figure out how to get you to want to buy their stuff. And now the system is leveraging algorithms and A.I. to more effectively make us covet – to think that we will only be truly happy if we can get newer, better, shinier stuff.

D. And this message is wrong. And it can mislead us – for a long time. Especially today. We need an inner world that is stronger than the outer world, and the outer world keeps getting stronger. The current we are swimming in keeps getting faster.

E. Now, let me note – like the other idols we are considering, material stuff is not a bad. I will go so far as to say: Amazon Prime is not evil. But if you let it, it takes you to a bad place. It tries to convince you that newer, better, shinier stuff will give your life meaning. And that is a lie. And we know it is a lie. And we have known this for a long, long time.

1. And we have known it was a lie for 3,000 years. The Greek hedonists figured this out a long time ago. In their work – which dove tails with what Solomon did in his book of Ecclesiastes – they learned that when you go after what you want – if you seek pleasure and deny yourself nothing – that pleasure goes away.
2. Today we call this the hedonic treadmill. Which says, what makes you happy today will not be enough tomorrow. It may work briefly, but our hearts are too big to be satisfied with stuff.

F. And so the Bible tells us – it tries to explain our heart to ourselves and protect us - saying:

1. Do not covet your neighbors' possessions but learn to be content with what we have and Seek first the kingdom of God.

2. Jesus says, “Man does not live by bread alone.” Which doesn’t mean that bread is bad, but that it is not enough.

G. And Paul writes about this in his letter to the Philippians – from jail, he writes about contentment, noting that he has “learned the secret of having plenty or having little and being content in either position.”

V. Men and women, like the other idols we are looking at, money (consumerism) does not present itself as an idol. It does not introduce itself and say: “Hi. I’m stuff and I’m an idol. I am here to distract you and mislead you, and maybe become an addiction.

VI. No, what we are up against are good things that we try to take too far.

VII. I dare say, if we could go back fifty years and show people your life – all the shiny stuff you have. The cars and computers and food. The entertainment options. If we told them how much money you made. If we took them to Amazon Prime and showed them how it worked. Most would say – if I had this, I would be happy.

A. The fact is, it’s not fair to say we live like kings or queens of the past, because we live much better.

B. But the hole in our hearts cannot be filled with stuff. And understanding that and managing our heart and our stuff is a never-ending project, because the idol of consumerism is always there saying, if you had that car, those golf clubs, those shoes, the latest and greatest lap top or whatever – you would be happy. And that is not true. But some people never look at their life or the word of God long enough to understand that truth, and so they fall victim to the idol of consumerism.

C. Which, by the way, is not a new thing. In some ways the challenges we face are different, but in other ways they are not.

D. In *Pilgrim’s Progress* John Bunyan described in vivid detail the village of Vanity Fair. Christian walks down a loud and rowdy street where everything is for sale: “Houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures; and delights of all sorts...And moreover, at this fair there is, at all times to be seen jugglings, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rouges, and that of every kind.” The main character, Christian, barely makes it out alive. We live in Vanity Fair.

VIII. So what do we do?

A. I have tried to help you see the water we are swimming in a bit more clearly. The reality is:

1. If people from the 100 years ago came back, in addition to marveling at the stuff, they would marvel at the ads – and see much of it as horrible.

2. And the irony is – and realize, all idols are ultimately ironic – the irony here is that while being a consumer gives us a sense of power. We can buy what we want. It really makes us quite small. We end up defined by what we buy, not by who we are – the image bearers of God.
 3. People created by Him to love and serve. To make a difference.
- B. Consider playing better defense. Think about how you might live in a consumer culture without being consumed. Think about some speed bumps you might place on the road to Vanity Fair?⁷
1. Do an inventory of all of your stuff - going through your closet to write down everything you have – and deciding to give what you don't need to the poor.⁸
 - a) If you haven't used something for a year – certainly if you haven't used it for two years – then you are unlikely to ever need it.
 2. Decide that you are going to set a low level on spending for the next month.
 3. Stop before you buy something and ask yourself why you are going to buy what you are going to buy. Is it because you need it, or because you are trying to buy happiness. Consider a buying fast for things other than food.
 4. Learn to decode the commercials. Learn to ask yourself - “what are they promising here?”
 - a) Os Guinness paid his children 25 cents if they could spot the lie in the commercials.
 5. Go back and read Solyzhnteizyns address to Harvard back in 1972
- C. Work on playing better offense: Seek First the kingdom of God.
- D. BTW, it seems to me that this series sets itself up well for small groups.

¹ Peter Berger writes, “Capitalism, through its sheer ability to deliver goods, has emerged as the most revolutionary force in human history.” Peter Berger, ed., *The Capitalist Spirit: Towards a Religious Ethic of Wealth Creation* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies), p. vii. , Cited in Hozee, p. 87.

² Perhaps one day I will give a talk on capitalism, but not today. That said, here are several thoughts / quotes: 1) Adam Smith – the 18th century Scottish philosopher - famously explained in his book, *The Wealth of Nations*. “If people are left alone – if government stays out of their way – the “invisible hand” of the market economy will transform the selfish choices of individuals into the greater good for society.” And the millions of decisions that people make in their own interests will be far more efficient than if some central power tries to make these same decisions for them. 2) As Michael Novak, a leading theologian and political thinker, writes: “Under democratic capitalism, the individual is freer than under any other political economy ever experience by the human race;” 3) Pope John Paul II, in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, stated that capitalism – properly defined – was “the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs.” // BTW, it would be more

accurate to state that Smith described capitalism while Marx advocated for communism. Smith believed that, given freedom, people would pursue their own best interest and that this would actually work for the common good. He advocated for a laissez-faire system in which the government let people do what they wished to do with minimal (preferably no) outside interference. It was up to the individual to take the initiative and provide for his or her own drive, incentive and capital to get a project off the ground. Scott Hozee, *The Riddle of Grace: Applying Grace to the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 95. // Note, when people write about democratic capitalism they generally mean three things in one: 1) a market economy; 2) a polity respectful of the rights of the individual to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and 3) a system of cultural institutions that are grounded in the ideals of liberty and justice for all. (See Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, p. 14), cited in Hozee, p. 95. // Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 339. Cited in Scott Hozee, *The Riddle of Grace: Applying Grace to the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 87. // Finally, It is worth noting that in many corners capitalism needs a P.R. campaign. While working on this message a local coffee shop I was drawn into a conversation in which one man was lambasting capitalism. He was designing a computer program of some sort and needed icons to represent various political and economic models. Socialism was a series of hands clasped together. Capitalism was a vampire! A bit later I was on a run and, crossing under a train bridge I noticed, scribbled on the concrete supports amid the graffiti the word “capitalism.” I stopped and read, “Man needs capitalism like he needs a bullet in the head.” Not very original – or witty – but telling.

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⁴ In his book *Compassionate Capitalism*, Richard DeVos points out that it was not until Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* that the individual became paramount. “Up until this time, people hadn’t always thought of themselves as individual agents, free to make decisions on their own. They thought of themselves as members of a community of class. With the old way of thinking, decisions were made by consensus or fiat, and the individual didn’t count for much.” (Richard DeVos, *Compassionate Capitalism: People Helping People Help Themselves* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 111. Cited in Hozee, p. 90.

⁵ Today companies spend billions of dollars to influence consumer behavior. Smart people learn how to get us to buy. Often – not always – but often by leveraging our fears and insecurities or by playing on our greed and lust. Sometimes with little or no concern about how this product will affect the consumer. To be sure there were charlatans hawking swamp water as the latest cure for cancer before. This is not new. But it is worth noting that much of today’s marketing is designed to render us to a state of perpetual discontent. To reduce us to consumers.

⁶ Today advertising is everywhere. Companies advertise in text books for high school. Ads are posted on egg cartons. Every piece of fruit has a label on it. Sporting events are full of ads. Several months ago I read about a woman who was paid to have a tattoo put on her forehead – which was an ad for a company. Years ago in 1922 - G.K. Chesterton visited Broadway and Times Square and then complained about the electric signs. He objected that all the “colours and fire” were attached to commodities. Powerful sacred meanings had once been lined to the spectacle of light and fire, yet today the ‘new illumination has made people weary of proclaiming great things, by perpetually using it to proclaim small things.” Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion*, p. 10f.

⁷ I am indebted to Duffy Robbins for this phrase and several insights. *Vanity Fair and the Teenage Wasteland*, *Youthworker Journal*, November/December 2006, p. 44.

⁸ Duffy Robbins, an author and youth worker, suggest that we all keep track of what we spend for a week and then also do a closet inventory. He has a point system. 5 pts for a sweater, 3 for a T-shirt, 7 for shoes. And then have everyone add up their points and share them.