

Advent Conspiracy

Week 2 ~ Spend Less

To answer the call of the Gospel to follow King Jesus faithfully necessitates that we Reimagine literally EVERYTHING. One of the larger, more impactful, aspects of life that this process entails is our relationship with, and use of, money. Additionally, there are few times of the year that highlight the contrast between a Kingdom-formed understanding/use of money versus a worldly-formed understanding/use of money than Christmas time. Yes, the irony is thick...a celebration meant to highlight the birth of King Jesus devolves into the biggest annual boom for the world's economy which distracts from the significance of the Incarnation.

A Kingdom-formed understanding of money recognizes that money (really ALL resources, literally EVERYTHING) belongs to God and that we are but stewards/managers of His stuff. Thus, money/resources ought to be used on what God prioritizes and values.

This starts to open a can of worms around our spending at Christmas time...

- Are you and I really in NEED of anything that we don't already have? (And who are those who are truly in need that God might prefer to see that money used for?)
- Why are we buying this or that gift this holiday season? (Is it just expected or tradition? Is it truly a sign of love? Is it the Law of Reciprocity at work? That is, the sense of obligation of doing something for someone because they have done something for us. Is it the concern of what others would think if we broke from what's expected?)
- Have we fallen for advertising/marketing ploys that are, by nature, products of a false narrative? (Or, what is the false narrative at play around the holiday season, and how might we be falling for it?)
- Who benefits from all this spending, and is that something I want to support? (Being conscientious consumers is a good idea all year long.)
- How would Jesus like us to honor Him? How would He like us to use (His) money this season?
- Is there a way of showing love to God, to family and friends, and to neighbors near and far that is deeper than what money can buy?
- What are our kids learning/picking up on amidst all the holiday hoopla?

These sorts of questions are not designed to make us feel bad or guilty but simply to get us thinking in a more Kingdom-oriented way and to help us see if there may be some adjustments we could make in how we observe this time of year. We also want to avoid becoming Scrooge-like (Bah Humbug!) around the holidays but rather take the opportunity to make sure

that our priorities line up with our Lord's priorities. (As followers of Jesus, this is the goal every season of the year.)

A line of questioning that our friends at Advent Conspiracy have encountered over the years goes something like this...

"Surely you don't really want Americans to spend less; you must understand that our economy relies on consumer spending. If Americans do not spend, then Americans will ultimately lose their jobs and suffer. Do you really want to cause suffering by asking Christians to spend less?"

To which they reply...

"Spending less does not mean spending nothing. Rather, we strive to thoughtfully evaluate what we support with our spending, and we allow our spending to support products, people, and causes that are worthy of being supported."

(Personally, I would add, the goal is for Christians to remember their ultimate identity and loyalty and act accordingly. Whatever happens to the US economy as a result is not our concern.)

What is easy to miss among all the tinsel and lights is the underbelly of a beastly economic system that is far more unjust than we'd like to admit. One of the easiest ways to subvert such a system is to spend/use money differently. This is what we are conspiring to do this Advent season. More importantly, the way we spend/use money allows us to highlight the reality of Jesus and His Kingdom.

We also realize that gift-giving is the love language for some. So we want to be clear here...we're not desiring to thwart gift-giving. The giving of gifts can be a beautiful and powerful thing. We simply want to ask the question, to get us thinking, whether we can perhaps give gifts (thoughtful, meaningful gifts) that don't require as much buying/spending. Could we make something? Could we spend quality time together or make memories together that don't require so much spending? If we spent less on gifts, might we be able to direct some money to needs, issues, or people that could really use that money?

Practically speaking, spending less creates margin in our lives by freeing up money to be used in different ways. If we live at or above our means we lack the freedom and ability to respond to the needs of others.

The world we live in encourages and promotes self-centeredness. Why? Because it's good for the economy. Jesus, on the other hand, teaches us to deny ourselves. And there's the rub. The world and the Kingdom run on completely different operating systems and core values. And here we are, trying to navigate our way through life with one clamoring for our attention and devotion, and the other whispering for our heart's affection. Which one is deserving of our allegiance?

Again, how we spend/use money demonstrates who truly has our attention, affection, and allegiance. For those who chose to follow Jesus, we need to make it a practice, a habit, to spend less on ourselves and more for Kingdom purposes.

Now just to back this up with a little Scripture...(Jesus' words are in red because we want to be **Red Letter Christians** 😊)

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth 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.”

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 (Mammon). Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34, emphasis added)

In explaining the Parable of the Soils Jesus said, *“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures, and they do not mature.” (Luke 8:14)*

In the Parable of the Rich Fool Jesus said, *“The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:16)*

Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:23-25)

In some of Paul's teachings about money he writes...

"Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written, "Those who gathered much did not have too much, and those who gathered little did not have too little." (II Corinthians 8:13-15)

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." (I Timothy 6:6-10)

We spent a month this year talking about "Good Politics" (September). Every political system has a corresponding economic system that supports it and fuels it. It's a very symbiotic relationship. From the perspective of disciples of Jesus, it is important to recognize that the Kingdom of God is not a democracy, and capitalism is not the economic system of the Kingdom. With that in mind, as Christians we are to order ourselves politically and economically differently than the world around us. By doing so we give testimony to the reign of King Jesus and His amongst us, which is what we're called to do...it's how we fulfill our Gospel mission/mandate. Additionally, if we're going to "act justly" (Micah 6:8), or work for justice in any way, then we must consider our use of money. Many of the issues of injustice in the world are due to how money and resources are accumulated and distributed.

Allow me to end this week with a couple thoughts from our friends at Advent Conspiracy...

"Our economy and our society have accepted radical greed as the norm, and each of us somehow justifies the suffering of others that our lifestyle causes. The only sure remedy is a change of heart, and the best place to begin is at the feet of the newborn Jesus."

"...the best way to break money's power is to give it away...", which will be the topic of discussion for next week.

Possible Discussion Questions

- Do you think about and plan how you spend/save money? Do you research a company before spending money with them? Do you pray about how you spend money? Or, how do you choose/decide how you spend money?
- What benefit is there in waiting for something you really want?

- How do you distinguish between a want and a need? (i.e. We need shoes; they don't have to be the latest Air Jordans.)
- How do you determine what is an acceptable amount of money to spend on an item? Or how much to spend during the holidays?
- When was a time that you wanted something just because someone else had it? Let me (Meg) tell a story that doesn't show my best side... Christmas 1992 or 1993 I cannot quite remember, the only thing I wanted was a Gameboy. Everyone who was anyone had one. I NEEDED one (well I thought I needed one). It was the only thing I asked for. When we were around the tree on Christmas morning, my younger sister opened a gift– a Gameboy. I was gobsmacked! I was angry and confused. Why did she get one and I didn't?! This wasn't the labeled family gift. It was not fair. In the middle of my sadness (and ungratefulness), my mom pointed to another neatly wrapped package... low and behold a Gameboy for me. It didn't feel nearly as good after how I just acted. I wanted it so badly for all the wrong reasons. Don't get me wrong, that Gameboy had countless hours of play but was it out of desire or out of guilt for how I behaved? Probably a combination of both.
- Are there any companies that you boycott...that you refuse to purchase from? Which companies and why?
- How do you feel knowing that our lifestyle (the average American lifestyle) causes suffering to others? What are some of the ways in which you justify that or cope with that? (Or, if you disagree with that premise, feel free to share...)
- How might you create more margin in your life financially? What might you be willing to go without in order to create margin so you can be more responsive to the needs of others?
- How/what have you taught your kids about money, spending, consumption?
- What are some creative, unique, and meaningful gift-giving ideas that don't require much spending of money?
- Were any of the passages of Scripture shared above new to you? As you read those passages, what thoughts and feelings did you experience?
- What invitation are you sensing from this week's discussion?
- How does your use of money demonstrate your loyalty to King Jesus?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Spend Only On Needs For One Week

This exercise is pretty self-explanatory. Simply try to go a week only spending money on things you actually need (ex. Food; gas; pay bills that are due, etc.) and try to avoid spending on any wants.

This exercise is designed to cause us to wrestle between what's a need and what's a want. It may also help us notice when we have impulses to buy/spend. For example, maybe we have a bad day, and something in use wants to go buy something to make us feel better. Or maybe you're bored and scrolling/browsing on your device and you get the urge to click "buy".

Those are important impulses to be aware of. Why we buy, what's going on inside us, is good to be aware of on our spiritual journey.

Now you might be asking yourself, "Is he seriously suggesting that I/we go a week–In December–to not spend unnecessarily?" Yes, yes I am...because I'm ornery like that 😊