

November 15, 2009
God's Wisdom ... on Shopping!
Assorted Proverbs

One of the greatest philosophers, Rene Descartes, coined the phrase, "*I think, therefore I am.*" Someone has suggested that a more appropriate summary for our times would be "*I shop, therefore I am.*" Shopping is not only a practical necessity; it is also a leisure activity. A sociologist was recently asked why home shopping services (television/online/direct mail) had not replaced retail outlets, as had been suggested a few years ago. Her response: people *need* to shop. Centuries ago, people shopped everyday - it was as much a social outing as a practical one! And the same is true today. Recent statistics suggest that North Americans spend an average of six hours each week shopping.

How would we in Alberta compare? Well, we do have the world's largest shopping mall ... and a brand new mega-shopping centre just north of Calgary. As a province we have more retail space per capita than any other province in Canada ...

Nowhere does the Bible suggest there is anything wrong with shopping! We need to do it! It may be a legitimate social outing for many of us. But there is wisdom in Proverbs that can help us appreciate God's thoughts on how we can shop wisely. And how we can deal with the bigger issue - how we use our money wisely.

Beware of the Power of Advertising!

Everywhere we turn there is advertising! On every street corner, on bus stops, in newspapers and magazines, on television, on computer screens. We cannot escape it! Most of us, I suspect, consider ourselves so used to advertising that we're sure we're immune to it. Other people may get duped by advertisers, but not us. You are probably a lot more vulnerable than you think!

One of the things advertisers often do is to portray a product (from vegetables to cruises) as if life would be perfect once you had it. Have you ever noticed how the peaches in the flyer are always perfect? How the vacationers on that tropic island are always so happy, fit, and relaxed? Yet the reality never quite seems the same...

Consider this proverb: "*He who works his land will have abundant food; but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment*" (Proverbs 12:11). It is a wise warning to heed as we flick through the magazines that attempt to persuade us to buy almost every fantasy under the sun. It's also a wise warning to heed in a province, famous for its "Fantasyland Hotel"!

I remember when I bought my first car. It was so exciting. I drove and drove and drove and drove. And then something happened. The car (or, in this case, the 1972 Volkswagen van) became old. It wasn't new (to me) anymore.

That's the problem with shopping. It can be wonderfully therapeutic at the time. Buying something that is just right! Or on a great sale! But the thrill wears off. And we are left feeling rather empty. The problem really isn't shopping! The problem really is that we're looking for satisfaction in the wrong place! Jesus reminds us that we need to "*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*" (Matthew 6:33).

One of the things advertising does is make us discontent. We need things we don't have. And even the things we do have aren't good enough. "*Godliness with contentment,*" writes Paul, "*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 men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many griefs.*" (1 Timothy 6:6-10) Notice within Paul's teaching is the reminder that ultimately God is the one who owns everything! We are simply His stewards.

That is another theme Jesus reminds us of, time and time again (For instance, Luke 12:13-21). Directly after Jesus warns about greed, He reminds us that we need not worry about our lives because God will take care of us. (Luke 12:22-34)

One of the wise things to ask ourselves when we're shopping is: "*Really - honestly - have I chosen this because I really need it? Or am I being persuaded by an advertiser? By peer pressure at work or school, or just by pressure to keep up with the Joneses? Because I think that having this thing will make me more popular? Or am I doing this because I think this will make me feel better - I'll be happy/life will be complete when I have this?*"

Beware of Dishonesty!

In Proverbs 20:23, God warns: "*The Lord detests differing weights, and dishonest scales do not please Him.*" It is possible, now, as back a couple of thousand years ago, for a merchant to take advantage of customers. God makes it clear that that sort of business is detestable!

The opposite may also be true! "*It's no good! It's no good!*" says the buyer; then off he goes and *boasts about his purchase!*" (Proverbs 20:14) Sometimes consumers make false complaints about products so they can get a discount, then crow about their wonderful deal to their friends! God makes it clear that this is unacceptable, too!

In business, whether we're selling or buying, God simply wants us to be honest! Again, He gives us a warning: "*Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man; but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel.*" (Proverbs 20:17) "*What about the house purchaser who takes advantage of a seller's difficulty to reduce her offer to lower than the true value?*" asks Peter Graystone. "*The reference to gravel means 'Your conscience will trouble you; real satisfaction comes from possessions that you come by honestly and fairly.'*"

Being scrupulously honest - as a seller or a purchaser - means I don't have to live with any guilt or regret. I can sleep peacefully knowing that my conscience is clear. If, in all things I have done the right thing, I can be at peace with myself, with my neighbour, and with the Lord.

Beware the Power of Greed!

Money, in itself, is just a thing. It's neutral. But "*the love of money*" is a root of all kinds of evil. If money - or the things money can buy - underlie our major life choices, occupy our thoughts when we're resting, become our end goal, then we have problems ...

On the one hand, Solomon warns us that, "*The stingy are eager to get rich and are unaware that poverty awaits them.*" (Proverbs 28:22). There are those whose sole ambition is to become wealthy. In financial terms they may even succeed. But there is a poverty - of the soul and in relationships - that can come with that single-minded purpose. People for whom wealth - or things, or experiences - are their driving passion are usually not happy, content people. Because enough is never enough. They always want more. They are rarely "refreshed" or content.

Proverbs 20:28 contains this sober warning: "*Whoever trusts in his riches will fall; but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.*" Money offers a false sense of security. But when our health or relationships fail, cash offers cold comfort.

Solomon also warns that: "*People curse the man who hoards grain; but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell.*" (Proverbs 10:24-26) Back in Solomon's day, farmers were known to hoard grain through the summer and fall, knowing that they would get a higher price in winter. In the same way, merchants today may artificially jack up prices when their product is in demand. God warns that that may be good business, but taking advantage of consumers is abhorrent to the Lord!

On the other hand: "*A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed*" (Proverbs 11:25). A popular proverb reminds us that "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" There is a lot of truth to that. If stingy/greedy people can end up poor in spirit or poor in their relationships, generous people often end up incredibly wealthy in terms of both their souls and their relationships.

"*He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*" Counterintuitive though it sounds, this is true to our experience. The more we give, the more we receive intangible - but incredibly valuable - blessings from God in terms that bless our hearts and relationships. "*One man gives freely, and gains more,*" observes Solomon, "*another withholds unduly, and comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*" (Proverbs 10:24-25). An essential part of our humanity is generosity. Those who are generous discover a contentment and fulfillment that is beyond measure, financially.

So how do I live?

- 1. Keep things in perspective:*** "*Don't wear yourself out trying to get rich. Be wise enough*

to know when to quit. In the blink of an eye wealth disappears, for it will sprout wings and fly away like an eagle"(Proverbs 23:4-5). Money - and the things money can buy - are not everything! In fact they are nowhere the most important things in life. Your relationship with God, your relationships with other people, your sense of calling and purpose, and your health are all far more important than stuff (including money). Make sure you spend your energy and time on the important things!

2. **Live more Simply.** The "Live It Out" Challenge from CBM we mentioned last week includes a component about "Living more simply." How can you simplify your life - and your demand for "stuff"? Your life will be less stressful. And you will have the resources to be able to bless others. www.cbmin.org - "Live It Out" link
3. **Use your money to be a blessing.** *"The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor"*(Proverbs 22:9). All we have is really God's. Our privilege - or challenge - is to be wise stewards of that, including generously supporting His work and those in need.
 - a. **Consider a "Legacy for Ministry":** Most of our estates will be far more valuable than our children really need. The Legacy for Ministry programme suggests we establish a "Charity Child" or two - if you have two children, divide your estate into three or four ... giving two parts to your children, but another one or two parts to ministries (if you have 3 kids, divide your estate 4 or 5 ways, etc). Legacy for Ministry is a programme created by Canadian Christians (western Canada Baptists!) to help us plan our estates wisely: www.legacyforministry.ca/home/
 - b. **Give a "Hopeful Gift":** instead of spending money on a gift for that person who has everything - or even instead of sending Christmas cards - use Canadian Baptist Ministries' "Hopeful Gift Catalogue" to give the gift - of a pig, goat, chicken, well, education, etc. - in someone else's name. Copies are in the foyer or online at: www.cbmin.org/cbm/gift-catalogue.
 - c. **Sponsor a child:** Compassion Canada allows you to provide essential help in a vulnerable country by sponsoring a child: www.compassion.ca

This Christmas - without buying a lot of "stuff" - you can make the most significant Christmas you have ever celebrated. Your soul and spirit will be refreshed. Your relationships will be richer than ever. Others will be blessed. And the Kingdom of God will grow. *"Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops"*(Proverbs 3:9).

"Lord God, be with us every day of this week:

Helping us choose carefully;

Helping us to spend wisely;

Helping us to decide thoughtfully.

And so may every purchase we make be done as if it was a gift to you. Amen

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