



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
PO Box 97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

The Center thanks the
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
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Study Guides for

Consumerism

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to examine our habits of excessive consumption. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

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Our excessive love of stuff is not merely a modern affliction, but an enduring addiction. The phenomenon of rampant American consumerism, despite current rhetoric, has deep-seated roots. Why are we unable to rein in our insatiable drive to consumption?

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Christmas cheer quickly turns sour as mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and exhausting activities overwhelm us. How can we celebrate Christ's birth with joyful simplicity that is much more than cutting back for the sake of cutting back?

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Focus Article:

📖 Stuff-Love
(*Consumerism*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Article:

📖 Curing Our Affluenza
(*Consumerism*, pp. 89-93)

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Stuff-Love

Our excessive love of stuff is not merely a modern affliction, but an enduring addiction. Rampant American consumerism, despite current rhetoric, has deep-seated roots. Why are we unable to rein in our insatiable drive to consumption?

Prayer

O God, awaken us to the challenges of this day. Open our eyes to the subtle pervasiveness of consumerism, that we might see our culture, the church, and ourselves in your divine light.

Remind us that you are the source of our hope and the giver of all that is good. You alone are worthy of our praise. Bring us to new life, that we might be your people. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:13-21

Reflection

Our being “restless in the midst of abundance,” de Tocqueville observed about Americans in the 1830’s, “is a spectacle as old as the world; all that is new is to see a whole people performing it.”

Restlessness amid abundance is the attitude that brought down Eden. The prophets chastised Israel for acquisitiveness as well as idolatry. Stuff-love, Singleton observes, is “rooted in the brand of idolatry described in Romans 1:25—worship of created things rather than the Creator. Regardless of how the good things come to us, there is still only one original Source, and we miss the boat when we place our trust anywhere else.”

Given this ancient lineage of our over-heated consumerism, changing our ways won’t be easy. We must:

- ▶ *perceive the increasing danger.* New technologies make over-consumption more hazardous. Our selfish habits and careless mistakes inflict greater harm on the environment. “Higher personal spending, including the service of consumer debt, drains disposable income that might otherwise contribute to social needs like healthcare and education.”
- ▶ *accept responsibility for our behavior.* We’re tempted to put total blame on advertising, as though it were “a very demon that has seduced us, dragging innocent, duped Americans unwillingly into the abyss of consumerism,” Singleton razzes. “Without such influences, apparently, we’d all be content to live like the Amish.” Let’s not excuse advertisers who use deceit and manipulation, but let’s admit that “if we seek self-confidence with our tooth whitener or status with our automobile, it’s because that’s what we really want—namely, to purchase our self-image like a commodity.”
- ▶ *critically weigh the new “simplicity” movement.* Through books and magazines, the movement’s “comfortable-enough-to-be-popular message to simplify sounds a bit like, ‘Try to cut down the credit card debt and buy organic, but hey, no one’s expecting you to go crazy here. Keep your basic cable.’” Beside promoting less than serious half-measures, there’s a danger that the simplicity movement will turn into a new form of self-indulgence. “I consume inconvenience, turning it



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into a pleasurable commodity," Bill McKibben writes, "it becomes the fuel for my own sense of superiority." The simple life turns out to be just another consumer lifestyle category: "Instead of defining ourselves by what we buy, we define ourselves by what we throw away."

Our challenge is to understand the appropriate boundaries on our consumption. In the church we have opportunities to explore these concerns and solutions with one another.

Study Questions

1. Do you see evidence that personal consumption increasingly competes with caring for the environment and meeting social needs, especially in America and other developed countries?
2. Consumerism has an ambiguous legacy in American history, Norman Wirzba reports (pp. 90-91). How has it been valuable? What problems has it left in its wake?
3. In the hymn "Bigger Barns," how is our over-consumption similar to the greed and personal insecurity of the rich man in Jesus' parable (Luke 12:16-21)?

Departing Hymn: "Bigger Barns"

"Bigger barns are what I need!"
So a rich man said one day.
"From my worries I'll be free
when my wealth is stored away."
"Fool!" God said, "Today you'll die!
Will your wealth mean anything?
All life's blessings really lie
in my life that wealth can't bring."

"Bigger barns are what we need
for our money, gadgets, more!"
Lord, we're tempted to believe
having wealth, we'll be secure!
Somewhere children cry for food
or to have a doctor's care.
Can our bigger barns be good
when poor neighbors know despair?

God of love, we long to know
what will make us truly blest.
Jesus taught us long ago
wealth won't give us peace or rest.
You are our security!
Safe in you, we serve, O Lord.
May we find we're rich indeed
when we're sharing with the poor.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (© 2001 All rights reserved.)
Suggested Tune: ABERYSTWYTH (Parry)

Rev. Gillette, co-pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Pitman, NJ, is author of *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today's Worship* (Geneva Press, 2000). Contact her at (856)-589-8444 or Bruce.Gillette@ecunet.org. A complete list of her hymns and links to twenty texts are at www.firstpresby.org/hymnlist.htm.



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Focus Article:

Mastering Mammon
(*Consumerism*, pp. 19-26)

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Mastering Mammon

What did Jesus mean when he declared, "You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money"? His teachings throughout the Gospels enable us to evaluate the consumer lifestyle.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:19-34

Responsive Reading

In mercy, O God, you confront us and expose our sin. May we respond in spirit and in truth, confessing our failure, reclaiming our hope.

In our lust for lifeless objects and our relentless pursuit for more, we cross the line between innocent desire and masked idolatry. We seek salvation in spiritless things, worship you for our own gratification, and see ourselves and each other as mere consumers and commodities.

Forgive us, O God, for we have sinned.

In your mercy, raise us from the dead.

Breathe new life into your people. Empower us to be a prophetic community, living the gospel of Jesus.

All: Create in us a consuming passion to love and serve you.

Reflection

Two treasures, two sorts of eye (stingy or generous), and two masters; in each case we must choose (Matthew 6:19-34). We were afraid discipleship would come to this: God or adequate resources. We cannot have it all!

Yet, tucked into Jesus' great sermon is this promise: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be *given* to you as well" (6:33). "Clearly the way believers receive back ... is through their new, large Christian family. The way we have our material needs met must therefore be the same—as fellow Christians share with those who are in need," says Blomberg. Jesus' call is plural—"y'all seek...and these things will be given to y'all. Precisely when the church as a whole strives to implement the justice on earth that matches God's will, then they will help the most materially needy in their midst."

We can learn more about Jesus' view of money through his:

- ▶ *parables*. Three parables in Luke—the rich fool (12:16-20), the unjust steward (16:1-9), and the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31)—condemn greed, but not great wealth. In the parable of judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), "those who will be allowed to enter his presence for eternity are those who have helped the materially needy, especially fellow Christian brothers and sisters, with their acute physical needs." Our faithfulness is demonstrated in how we use money to care for others.
- ▶ *concern for the poor*. Jesus' ministry was good news to the poor (Luke 4:16-21) and he blessed the poor (Luke 6:20). He commanded disciples to "give to everyone who begs from you" (Matthew 5:42), though, as Augustine acutely observed, this doesn't mean "give everything to the one who asks."



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► *encounters with the rich*. “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor,” Jesus told a ruler (Luke 18:22b). But this is followed, in the gospel of Luke, by the story of Zacchaeus (19:1-10) and the parable of the pounds (19:11-27). “Zacchaeus repented by voluntarily giving up a little over half of his wealth, while the good servants in the parable are praised because they invested their master’s money and made more! It is as if Luke wanted deliberately to juxtapose diverse models for being a good steward.”

We should not ignore Jesus’ call to evaluate every use of money. Indeed, “that Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions,” Robert Gundry says, “gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* issue that command.”

Study Questions

1. How does your church address the needs of the poor in your community, and throughout the world?
2. What aspect of Jesus’ teaching on money disturbs you most?
3. Does a graduated tithe—the more we earn, the higher percentage we give to the Lord’s work—fit with Jesus’ teaching?

Departing Hymn: “Bigger Barns”

“Bigger barns are what I need!”
So a rich man said one day.
“From my worries I’ll be free
when my wealth is stored away.”
“Fool!” God said, “Today you’ll die!
Will your wealth mean anything?
All life’s blessings really lie
in my life that wealth can’t bring.”

“Bigger barns are what we need
for our money, gadgets, more!”
Lord, we’re tempted to believe
having wealth, we’ll be secure!
Somewhere children cry for food
or to have a doctor’s care.
Can our bigger barns be good
when poor neighbors know despair?

God of love, we long to know
what will make us truly blest.
Jesus taught us long ago
wealth won’t give us peace or rest.
You are our security!
Safe in you, we serve, O Lord.
May we find we’re rich indeed
when we’re sharing with the poor.

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Focus Article:

📖 The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth
(*Consumerism*, pp. 65-70)

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Who Are the Meek?

Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." What a fundamental paradox: Mammon is ours, the earth is ours, life is ours—if we return them to God! The poor, the lowly, and the despised are honored and welcome in the kingdom. The affluent are no less welcome, but they have to leave their baggage behind.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

Responsive Reading[†]

Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

**Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.**

Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.

**For the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.**

Reflection

Americans receive mixed messages about money. One message is, "Do good, be honest, and obey the law." But the other says, "Take what you can for yourself." Some people may even enjoy the thrill of "leading a double life—outwardly a conservative, respectable businessman but inwardly working all the angles to get rich," Simon notes. "Perhaps most of us want to make it, to enjoy the symbols of success, but hope to do it honestly." How far our thinking is from Jesus' proclamation: the meek receive the earth as their inheritance!

Who are the meek? In Psalm 37 the meek "trust in the Lord" and "commit [their] way to the Lord;" they find their happiness in God-given salvation (37:3, 5). That's not the wisdom the world. The world tells us that aggressive, ambitious men and women seize the earth. Though haughty ambition and infatuation with success may be virtues in the world, the faithful are called to be meek, trusting, and committed to God.

Meek persons are patient, gentle, and mild, but they are not spineless. "Far from suggesting excessive submission to others," writes Simon, "meekness means submission to God, which gives strength for obedience." They do not strive after their inheritance, but embrace their God-given deliverance with a trusting spirit.

"The examples of Jesus and Moses teach us that to be meek is not to be shorn of ambition, but to have one's ambition transformed from self-serving purposes to that of serving God." Meekness puts generosity over gain. So, Simon asks "What would happen if we really became meek? What if we showed extravagant generosity with God's gifts to us? How much more empowered our lives and the mission of the church would be. And how much less suffering the world would have." Simon commends two ways to advance in Christian meekness:



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Brett R. Dewey, Graduate Assistant in The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, is the author of this study guide.

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► *Receiving the mind of Christ* involves following him and conforming to his virtues. That he “carried his obedience to the cross for our sake defined the meekness of Jesus as extraordinary courage,” and only the bravest dare to embrace the virtues Jesus lived. The trust in God that is essential to meekness may come more easily to the poor, dependent, and oppressed. Such trust is especially difficult for the well-connected and self-sufficient. Yet we discover—as the mind of Christ replaces a worldly way of thinking—that leaving our baggage of possessions behind leads paradoxically to gaining the kingdom.

► *Honoring God and properly valuing creation* challenges the persistent temptation in our consumerist culture to value stuff over the Creator. “To obtain the earth, we must give earthly treasures away and place our hearts elsewhere.” Letting go of the earth acknowledges that the earth belongs to the Lord. God bestows the gifts of creation on us to treasure, care for, and enjoy. But when we are captivated by mammon, we lose sight of the fact that we are stewards, not owners.

The things of the earth are not ends in themselves; worshipping or hoarding them is a lost cause. Mammon is a servant to be used in a way that honors the God to whom all things belong. “And God, in turn, honors us not simply with the earth, but with the kingdom as our inheritance. A house, a bed, a family meal, friendships, work, prayer, pleasure, income, citizenship—these and all other things are changed, their value dramatically enhanced because they are accepted as treasures to enjoy and employ for the highest purposes.”

Study Questions

1. Meekness requires “one’s ambition [be] transformed from self-serving purposes to that of serving God” (p. 68). How does *receiving the mind of Christ* play a role in this transformation? What role does *honoring God through proper valuation of creation* play?
2. What other traits of Christian character are closely related to the meekness that Christians need today?
3. “Much has been made recently of an obscure prayer of a man named Jabez who asked the Lord to ‘bless me and enlarge my territory’ (1 Chronicles 4:10), a prayer that is being held up as a model for Christians,” Simon notes (p. 68). How would a meek person interpret the prayer? How can we expect it to be interpreted in our mammon-driven culture?
4. How is the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4) a model of meekness?
5. Can a wealthy person today be meek? What would it mean in our culture to “leave their baggage [of possessions] behind”?

Departing Hymn: “O God, You Own a Thousand Hills”

†Adapted from Psalm 37:3-5, 11 (NRSV).



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Discovering Our True Identity
(*Consumerism*, pp. 32-38)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Which Kingdom?
(*Consumerism*, pp. 83-89)
- 📖 Past the Blockade
(*Consumerism*, pp. 48-50)

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Discovering Our True Identity

Consumerism can encourage the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, and self-centeredness. By giving us a new identity as members of God’s Body, the Eucharist can form us in fidelity, other-centeredness, and proper joy, which are counter-cultural to the ethos of consumer culture.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Responsive Reading†

Bread of the world, in mercy broken,
Wine of the soul, in mercy shed,
**By whom the words of life were spoken,
And in whose death our sins are dead.**

Look on the heart by sorrow broken,
Look on the tears by sinners shed;
**And be Thy feast to us the token,
That by Thy grace our souls are fed.**

Reflection

“Consumerism is more than the mere creation and consumption of goods and services,” Medley writes. It encourages the mistaken belief that our needs can only be satisfied by excessive consumption. Soon consumers “need to need and desire to desire. Instead of consuming goods themselves, they consume the *meanings* of goods as those have been constructed through advertising and marketing. In a sense, they become what they buy.” Examples are easy to find: we buy “Harley-Davidson motorcycles to symbolize personal freedom, Nike shoes to suggest ‘I want to be like Mike,’ and clothing from Abercrombie and Fitch to communicate chic casualness.” We buy self-images that are greedily centered on competition and self-promotion.

To Christians caught up in self-centeredness and competition, Paul writes: “Examine yourselves,...then eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28). Share the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, in the right spirit. For at the table we *receive* our true identities as children of God and are prepared to resist the identities proffered by our consumerist culture. As often as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, as Augustine reminds us, we receive the mystery of ourselves. The Eucharist:

► *forms us in faithfulness.* Consumerism encourages us “to be deeply committed to being uncommitted,” says Medley, “to flit from one thing to another in the search for that ‘missing something.’” Planned obsolescence and disposability become virtues in products we buy and relationships we consume. In contrast, the Supper celebrates God’s abiding and abundant presence, and faithfulness to humanity. “In performing the story of God’s faithfulness, the Eucharist calls us to faithfulness” to Christ and one another around the table.

► *cultivates hospitality.* We tend to treat one another as commodities, or as vendors of services for which we’ve contracted. The Eucharist counters this self-centeredness by teaching us



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to pay loving attention to God, God's creation, and our fellow humanity. It "reminds us that God's grace comes not only in the form of bread and wine, but also in the form of flesh and blood." We cannot properly receive the Supper, the Apostle Paul teaches, without embracing the other persons at the table as the living Body of Christ.

► *points us toward true joy.* "Consumer culture tempts us to take delight primarily in what the world has to offer," but we were created to delight in the one true God. "When our lives are marked by a spirit of joy that flows from authentic praise and thanksgiving for God's abundant care," Medley observes, "our covetousness will be checked." We will find the contentment that we seek not in the "brands" we consume, but in fellowship with the giving and forgiving Creator.

Paul's warning to the Corinthian church reminds us how easily our church practices are co-opted or deformed by the very consumerist values we should be resisting. Indeed, "the way many churches imitate the techniques of...advertising and marketing," Barry Harvey observes, "transforms the body of Christ into yet another culture industry, one more vendor of products and services for mass consumption. Church [practices are]...refitted to accord with the preferences of 'target populations' who have been raised to think of themselves almost exclusively as self-interested consumers."

Study Questions

1. How was self-centeredness and competition disrupting the fellowship of the Corinthian church? How did Paul counter those distortions with his description of the Lord's Supper?
2. Is the Lord's Supper a frequent and central part of your congregation's worship? How do you accent the themes of fidelity, hospitality, and joy through relationship with God?
3. "The application of Jesus' temple-clearing is not to mandate what can or can't be sold in a church building," Craig Blomberg says, but the issue of "when we allow church to be turned into a business in ways that compromise worship" (pp. 24-25). How does J. M. W. Turner's *Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple* (pp. 48-50) develop this issue?
4. In what ways do churches pitch their "activities, convictions, architecture, and liturgy...to accord with the preferences of 'target populations' who have been raised to think of themselves almost exclusively as self-interested consumers"? How is this dangerous to the communication of the gospel?
5. Comment on Harvey's statement: "[After September 11], the airwaves and print media were filled with ads elevating conspicuous consumption to a quasi-patriotic duty. These appeals for all good Americans to return to habits of unrestrained consumption are far more revealing about ourselves...than we might like to think" (p. 89).

Departing Hymn: "O God, You Own a Thousand Hills"

'Reginald Heber, "Bread of the World, In Mercy Broken," from *Hymns Written and Adapted to the Weekly Service of the Church Year* (1827).



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Focus Article:

📖 More Like Mephibosheth
(*Consumerism*, pp. 39-43)

Suggested Article:

📖 Talking Back to the Tube
(*Consumerism*, pp. 61-64)

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More Like Mephibosheth

Consumerism, first and foremost, is a culture of expectation that erodes our ability to appreciate relationships, kindnesses, and other pleasures of life. We are trained to evaluate, inspect, and be suspicious that what is offered isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Isn't this mistrusting mindset exactly what the serpent exploited in Eden?

Prayer

Gracious God, we are aware that your call to us is profoundly counter-cultural.

The consumer religion coaches us to believe that we are the center of the universe, that all things were created for us and our pleasure. We are taught to hoard our resources, to keep for ourselves, to value personal comfort above service and accumulation over sacrifice.

Yet you have shown us another way in the life and teachings of Jesus, in his death and resurrection.

As we reclaim our Christian heritage, we remember that all things were created for your pleasure, and we celebrate the invitation to participate in your work, bringing the ethics of heaven to earth. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 2 Samuel 4:4; 9:1-13; 16:1-4; and 19:24-30

Reflection

"Oddly enough, I find my twenty-first century American consumer behavior challenged by this ancient Israelite, he of the mellifluous name and malfunctioning feet, son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul," writes Singleton. "Mephibosheth, to begin with, knew something about gratitude." He received King David's unmerited kindness: "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?" (2 Samuel 9:8). Even after a servant, Ziba, tricked the King into withdrawing his gift, Mephibosheth remains loyal and does not object.

Is Mephibosheth's behavior an example for us to follow? His self-effacing gratitude and submission echoes in King David's words: "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (2 Samuel 7:18). The great King "after God's own heart," especially after his moral failings, knew how little he deserved the kindness he received. We find "Mephibosheth moments" in other biblical exemplars, from John the Baptist stepping back to enhance Jesus' ministry (John 3:30) to Jesus himself, who "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (Philippians 2:6) and, along the way, instructed us to take the lowest place and turn the other cheek.

Mephibosheth's humility is almost offensive to us. "Our natural desires, after all, perpetually run in the direction of self-interest," Singleton observes. "The allure of having our expectations met by God is, sadly, readily mangled by worldly assumptions. Thus perverted, it too often leaves us as Christians looking around in dissatisfaction for the perfect church, the perfect job, the perfect home, even perhaps the perfect mate."



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There is a place for “righteous indignation” about goods and services. Jesus’ temple clearing serves as a model of zeal for God’s purposes, especially for protecting the rights of the weak and the poor. “Making sure a dangerous child’s toy got recalled is the kind of consumer-minded concern that might fit this call to action,” Singleton suggests. But this should not be confused with zeal for getting what we deserve, which, she confesses, is “the object of the zeal I exercise in my Consumer-Reports-minded reaction to errors and inconveniences—those moments when I confuse being ‘right’ with being ‘righteous.’”

Though it doesn’t have the ring of “Dare to be a Daniel” or even “Be Like Mike,” being a little “More Like Mephibosheth” is an appropriate aspiration in our consumerist culture.

Study Questions

1. What do you find attractive about Mephibosheth? What traits or actions of his bother you?
2. How can the hard-to-please-consumer attitude disrupt human relationships and our relationship to God?
3. Do you agree with Dewey’s view in “Talking Back to the Tube” that television is a major source of our heightened consumerist expectations? Where is the television placed in your home, and what does this say about its importance?
4. Dewey recommends “talking back to the tube” as a way of resisting television’s barrage of consumerist values and images (pp. 63-64). Have you ever done this? What commercial (or program) and its exaggerated expectations about products, services, relationships, or institutions would you like to resist?

Departing Hymn: “Take My Life and Let It Be” (altered)

Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my hands, and let them move
at the impulse of Thy love,
at the impulse of Thy love.

Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Take my voice, and let me sing
always, only, for my King,
always, only, for my King.

Take my silver and my gold;
not a mite would I withhold.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for Thee,
ever, only, all for Thee.

Frances R. Havergal (1874)
Tune: HENDON



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Focus Article:

📖 Beyond Candy Cane Lane
(*Consumerism*, pp. 76-82)

Suggested Article:

📖 From Francis to Fezziwig
(*Consumerism*, pp. 71-75)

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Baylor University
PO Box 97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Beyond Candy Cane Lane

Our Christmas cheer can quickly turn sour as mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and an exhausting calendar of activities overwhelm us. How can we celebrate Christ's birth with joyful simplicity that is much more than cutting back for the sake of cutting back?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 96

Responsive Reading (from Titus 2:11-15a):

Declare these things:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Reflection

Christians around the world celebrate Christmas Day with a lectionary reading from Psalm 96. Its praise of the Lord as King of the universe echoes in their hearts as a glad welcome of King Jesus. Why do all the peoples sing, and why does the creation rejoice? The world's true King has come to judge it with equity, righteousness, and truth (96:10, 13). Paired with this psalm in the lectionary is a confession from Titus 2:11-14—we dwell in an in-between time, for we are redeemed by “the grace of God,” but wait for the full “manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” In “the present age,” we are being “trained” and “purified” to live in righteousness and equity. This, proclaims the church, is the good news of Christmas Day.

This message is often obscured, Schobert warns, by “the celebratory excess of America’s real religion, consumer capitalism.” In early America, Christians endorsed quiet worship at Christmas, and some even tried to stamp out raucous public holiday celebrations. Yet the most successful trend originated in the northeastern cities with the invention of Santa Claus and other “nostalgic traditions of home and hearth.” Soon retailers used Santa Claus to promote shopping and family gift-giving. “Once this commercialization took root, as early as the 1830s, helped along by the rise of advertising, marketing, and the industrial production of goods, it was only a matter of time until consumerism replaced public rowdiness and drowned out the angelic choruses announcing the Newborn King.” To disentangle Christmas from consumerism, he suggests that we:

- ▶ *root festivities in the church year.* “In an academic calendar, Christmas is ‘time off’ sandwiched between semesters, and in the secular calendar, it’s the crown jewel of year-ending holidays, Thanksgiving-Christmas-New Year’s Eve. Only



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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the church calendar places Christmas in its true context—following the penitential season of Advent and before the redemptive events of Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.”

- ▶ *shop subversively*. When we buy fair-trade gifts, we announce the good news of righteousness and equity. “As much as forty percent of a fair-trade item’s retail price is returned to the producer and reinvested in community development projects like education, healthcare, sanitation, or micro-loan programs,” Schobert reports. “It can be a refreshing alternative to storming the shopping malls.”

Study Questions

1. How does the carol “What Child is This?” locate Christmas celebrations within their true context in the church year?
2. Review your Christmas gift-giving in light of our “training ... in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, up-right, and godly” (Titus 2:12). In addition to fair-trade gifts, do other sorts of gifts to family and friends declare the good news of righteousness and equity for all peoples?
3. “We can have festivity without selling out to Mammon, without embracing the greedy trappings of a consumer culture,” Katie Cook writes. How does Fezziwig, like Jesus, show how “to celebrate without shutting their eyes to the terribly real pain all around them” (*Consumerism*, p. 73, 75)?

Departing Hymn: “What Child is This?”

What Child is this who, laid to rest
on Mary’s lap is sleeping;
whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
while shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

Why lies He in such mean estate,
where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
come peasant, king to own Him;
the King of kings salvation brings,
let loving hearts enthrone Him.
Raise, raise a song on high,
the virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

William C. Dix, from *The Manger Throne* (1865)
Suggested Tune: GREENSLEEVES

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Stuff-Love

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To consider how deeply seated is human greed, such that over-consumption is an enduring addiction as well as a modern affliction.
2. To recognize temptations to scapegoat business and advertising, and to twist “simplicity” into another consumer lifestyle.
3. To explore consumerism’s ambiguous legacy in American culture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the hymn “Bigger Barns,” locate the tune ABERYSTWYTH (Parry) in your church’s hymnal.

Begin with a Comment

Share Alexis de Tocqueville’s comments about Americans in the 1830’s, which begins “Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die ...” (*Consumerism*, pp. 11-12).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 12:13-21 from a modern translation.

Reflection

As we begin to examine our consumerist culture in the light of the Gospel, we are struck by this tension: is our over-consumption merely a recent phenomenon, egged on by aggressive advertising and free-market capitalism, or is it an expression of an enduring human temptation to greed? The first diagnosis suggests that the problem is ‘outside’ us, so we should evaluate business practices and resist marketing lures; the latter diagnosis locates the cause ‘inside’ us and encourages self-examination of selfish desires rooted in the human heart. Laura Singleton finds truth in both views: “Though advancements in our technology are making current levels of consumption, by Americans in particular and the developed world overall, more hazardous than in the past, our excessive love of stuff is *not merely a modern affliction, but an enduring addiction*” (emphasis added, *Consumerism*, p. 11).

So, on the one hand she invites us to review the increasingly hazardous nature of our patterns of consumption, especially in America and the developed world. On the other hand, she warns us not to push all the blame on contemporary business and advertising practices, and even to be suspicious of the tendency to market the new “simplicity” movement as another consumer lifestyle.

In Luke 12:13-21, a man asks Jesus for a rabbinical judgment. Sensing the fellow’s underlying greed, Jesus warns the crowd “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” and tells them a parable about a rich fool. Verse 20 draws a connection between greed and idolatry through two details:

(1) God appears as a character to speak the words of judgment to the rich man, highlighting the opposition between them, and (2) the man is called a “fool,” which in the Jewish wisdom tradition is one who rejects God’s way of living. Seeking “one’s life” and personal security in the abundance of material goods exemplifies Paul’s definition of idolatry as “worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25).

Study Questions

1. Members may mention global warming, degradation of fisheries, air pollution, depletion of groundwater, pollution of fresh-water supplies, hazardous waste dumping, or other environmental problems that are exacerbated by greediness.

In relation to social needs, they might notice that the wealthy give a smaller percentage of their income to the church and other benevolences than do the poor (*Consumerism*, p. 11). Charitable giving has been declining for three decades. The *empty tomb, inc.* reports even church members gave less and less percentage of their income to the church and other benevolences from 1968 to 2000: overall giving decreased from 3.10% to 2.64% (a decline of 15%); giving to their local congregation declined from 2.45% to 2.24% (a drop of 9%); and giving to all other benevolences dropped from 0.66% to 0.40% (a decline of 39% as a portion of income). You can download graphs for discussion from their website, www.emptytomb.org.

Encourage members to discuss local church or community issues that might indicate we are less concerned about the common good.

2. Wirzba notes that consumerism played a valuable role in establishing liberty and democracy in America. “As diverse ethnic groups came to America, the purchase of commodities gave them the opportunity to at least appear to be on an equal footing with others. What was being consumed, in other words, were not only material goods but also personal identities. With the right clothing or car, the appropriate cigarette or appliance, they could break from old traditions without necessarily abandoning, or, as was the case in many old-world cultures, violently clashing with them, and thus enter the cultural mainstream.... [Thus] consumerism is not simply about greed or personal insecurity. It gives concrete shape to liberty by providing various means for personal expression. It enlivens democracy by enabling diverse groups to share in the ownership and use of goods.” (*Consumerism*, p. 90).

However, consumerism has a destructive legacy as well: “The satisfaction of immediate needs, for instance, has had the effect of quelling the desire to search for higher goals. It has obliterated a culture of constraint, just as it has often undermined communities of shared values and long-lasting commitments. Moreover, ‘affluence hardly encouraged introspection and self-cultivation’ (238). As consumerism, especially at century’s end, becomes an increasingly individualistic and private affair, we risk losing key virtues that stabilize and promote social life: care for others, compromise, friendship, responsibility to the past, and a felt obligation for the future” (*Consumerism*, p. 91).

3. The hymn says, “Bigger barns are what we need for our money, gadgets, more!” / Lord, we’re tempted to believe having wealth, we’ll be secure!” Compare Singleton’s observation on our false trust in consumption for security (of our self-image): “If we seek self-confidence with our tooth whitener or status with our automobile, it’s because that’s what we really want—namely, to purchase our self-image like a commodity” (*Consumerism*, p. 15).

The hymn also notes that our concern for security draws us away from helping our neighbors: “Can our bigger barns be good when poor neighbors know despair?”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Mastering Mammon

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 18:18-30
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (review all)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Question 1	Questions 2 and 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To introduce what Jesus taught about our proper relation to material possessions.
2. To appreciate Jesus' concern for the poor.
3. To explore the principle of a "graduated tithe" and the wise direction of our tithed funds.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the hymn "Bigger Barns," locate the tune ABERYSTWYTH (Parry) in your church's hymnal.

Begin with a Comment

Arthur Simon writes: "In blessing the meek, Jesus is lifting up not the acquisitive and well-connected, but the poor, the powerless, and those more often oppressed than successful, who typically wind up on the underside of social respectability. Most of us, myself included, have a hard time accepting this eagerly, and a hard time receiving the gift of the kingdom as really good news, because we are among the privileged. It is hard to seize a disturbing truth when a comfortable life depends on toning it down. Perhaps that is why, as John Haughey has observed, 'We read the Gospel as if we had no money, and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the Gospel'" (*Consumerism*, p. 67).

In this study Craig Blomberg guides us to reflect on not only "What would Jesus do?" but also "What did Jesus teach?" regarding money.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will guide members to grateful and generous use of their material resources.

Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Matthew 6:19-21, 22-23, and 24-34 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Because this study surveys a number of Jesus' parables and teachings, as well as several important events in his ministry, you may want to study the material over two sessions. The group might focus on several of Jesus' parables in the first session, and then discuss his encounters with the rich (in chapters 18 and 19 of Luke) in the second session.

One of the three contrasts in the scripture reading—the choice between the healthy eye and light-filled body, or a diseased eye and darkened body (Matthew 6:22-23)—seems like an odd insertion into Jesus' teaching about money. Some commentators think the passage hearkens to the Jewish idea that

one's eye reveals whether one is generous (healthy/bright) or greedy (diseased/darkened). This instruction in the Apocrypha draws a similar connection: "To all those who practice righteousness give alms from your possessions, and do not let your eye begrudge the gift when you make it. Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor, and the face of God will not be turned away from you" (Tobit 4:6b-7).

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to explore your church's opportunities for local ministry and witness as well as the percentage of church budget gifts that are forwarded to other Christian care agencies. Does your church apply biblical models of stewardship thoughtfully? Has the congregation started new ministries for the poor in recent years? How is the church budget planned and adopted?

Blomberg concludes: "But even the most generous American churches still spend a considerable majority of the money they take in on themselves—their staff, facilities, and programs. So-called 'missions budgets,' in especially generous congregations, may range between ten and twenty percent, but seldom more than half of that ever leaves the United States and an even smaller percentage goes to the 'holistic' gospel of Jesus—meeting people's most desperate physical as well as spiritual needs—in the most impoverished and/or unevangelized parts of the world. Obedient Christians will therefore give generously to their local congregation *and* donate perhaps an even larger sum to Christians and Christian organizations more directly involved in addressing the most acute needs of our global village" (*Consumerism*, pp. 25-26). Do members agree? Do they have Christian organizations to recommend that help the poor?

2. Sometimes Jesus' instructions are all too clear, but we wonder if they are meant to be taken literally today. We must rely upon careful scholarship to explain the context of the instruction. (Do members agree with Blomberg's commentary on the biblical passages in this study? Do they have other interpretations for the group to weigh?)

In other instances, Jesus' instructions are vague and we wonder how to apply them. The church as a body bears the responsibility to interpret his commands for each new situation. (Does your congregation discuss individual and group stewardship openly and frequently?)

Jesus' parables can be confusing, especially if we attempt to read them as allegories with a specific contemporary meaning corresponding to each detail in the story. (Do members agree with Blomberg's commentary on the parables in this study?)

3. Blomberg says the graduated tithe is suggested by Jesus' comments concerning the widow whose gift of "two small copper coins" represented "all she had to live on" (Mark 12:41-44). "Perhaps the 'New Testament model' for Christian giving today is not the 'flat tax' of a tithe, or ten-percent, for everyone," he writes, but a graduated tithe—"the principle not of equal amounts or equal percentages of giving but of equal sacrifice.... As Linda Belleville explains in the context of commenting on 2 Corinthians 8:11-15, another key text on our topic, 'Whereas a fixed 10 percent would most likely be negligible for someone with an income of \$100,000, it could well cripple a person with an income of \$10,000.' This also accords with Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:48 that 'we are responsible in direct proportion to how God has blessed us.'"

Encourage members to brainstorm on how a family might determine a percentage they should give to the Lord's work, both through their congregation and other Christian aid organizations.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Who Are the Meek?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the biblical virtue of meekness.
2. To consider how we advance in meekness by receiving the mind of Christ, honoring God, and properly valuing the creation.
3. To reflect on how meekness requires us to retreat from the baggage of affluence.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with a prayer that members will be led to a more trusting and committed relationship with God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:1-12 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The Greek word translated “blessed” in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11) is *makarios*. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by the early church, this word is used for the happiness experienced in God-given salvation, but not for the self-striving successes or driven attainments of individuals. Thus, the phrase “blessed are the meek,” means “God’s salvation graciously comes to those who are meek.”

Many are puzzled by the blessing of the meek in Matthew 5:5. “Who are the meek?” we wonder (for we don’t think meekness is a particularly admirable trait), and “What could mean for *them* to ‘inherit the earth’?”

To answer our first question, Simon appeals to the picture of meekness in Psalm 37 (where it is parallel to “trust in the Lord” and “commit your way to the Lord”) and in the lives of Moses and Jesus (where it is certainly not spinelessness). In answer to our second question, he says we are graciously given the kingdom of God. “To inherit the earth we must let go of the earth. To obtain the earth, we must give earthly treasures away and place our heart elsewhere,” he writes. “Why should we ever wish for something so insignificant and transient as wealth or fame when God offers us the kingdom as an inheritance? And to celebrate the kingdom, why would we not gladly die to our privileges so that others may live?” (pp. 68-69).

To put on Christian meekness is to “have one’s ambitions transformed from self-serving purposes to that of serving God.” Simon highlights two ways of doing this: (1) receiving the mind of Christ and (2) honoring God by properly valuing creation. To receive the mind of Christ, or to adopt his patterns of thinking and acting in the world, requires great courage. He elevated the powerless, “those more often oppressed than successful,” those who usually wind up under the foot of the mighty. Most of us are the socially respectable, and might “find it hard to seize [such a] a disturbing truth when a comfortable life depends on toning it down” (p. 67). To honor God through properly valuing the created good would prove itself in great care for the creation and generous sharing of our possessions. The value of created goods becomes “dramatically enhanced because they are accepted as treasures to enjoy and employ for the highest purposes” (p. 69). Christian meekness leads us to receive our possessions as stewards rather than owners.

Study Questions

1. *Receiving the mind of Christ* grounds meekness in the life and obedience of Jesus Christ, who is our model of trusting faithfulness, rather than in individual ambition or self-striving gain. We look to Jesus’ teachings about trusting God and to his actions in following God’s will, even to his death on the cross. *Honoring God by properly valuing created goods* brings us to a proper sense of self-worth and self-respect. It enables us to realize that we are not self-made, and that our greatest goods (including family, friends, health, and opportunities, as well as possessions) are gifts from God to be treasured and employed to the highest purposes.
2. Members might list traits in Psalm 37, such as trusting God, delighting in God’s faithfulness through worship, committing to the way of God, refraining from anger, and waiting on God. Or, they might brainstorm other traits (such as love for God over self, commitment to strong Christian communities, and sharing) that help us resist the temptations to materialism, distorted ambition, greed, and regarding others as mere instruments to our self-fulfillment or status.
3. In meekness, we might ask God to give us new opportunities for love and service. In our mammon-driven culture, the prayer might be read to ask for increased possessions and control of resources.
4. The Lord’s Prayer is the guideline for prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples. It encourages trust in God and conformity of our desires to the kingdom’s goals. By addressing God as “Abba” or “Father,” the prayer indicates we are dependent on God. It honors God above all the creation (“hallowed be your name”), and asks that God’s kingdom, rather than our vision, be realized in the world. Even when we pray for our needs (“our daily bread”), we are to realize that God is the source of all good things and we are not to ask for everything we greedily desire.
5. Simon suggests that meekness requires a change in perspective, away from “failing to see the earth as God’s gift” and investing in ourselves, and toward investing our money, time, ability, and influence in heaven—“that is to say, those given to help others, those put in service for the needy, those shared with the poor, those furthering the mission of the church, those protecting the earth for future generations. These, offered to God, have transcendent value.” The meek look at all of their resources as gifts from God to be graciously received and shared with others. “We inherit the earth by seeing it with the eyes of faith,” Simon writes. “Because we are part of God’s new creation in Christ, we can perceive the world as it really is, and as it one day will be when, in the resurrection, the reign of God is fully revealed” (p. 69).

Surely a wealthy person can be meek, but this would require great effort to live for others and avoid the trap of seeing the world as “my oyster.” They will be tempted to save and expend resources as other people do, rather than in ways consistent with Jesus’ meekness.

Departing Hymn

“O God, You Own a Thousand Hills” is on pp. 52-53 of *Consumerism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Discovering Our True Identity

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how consumerism is a character-cultivating way of life that constructs or ‘sells’ identity.
2. To examine how we receive our true identity by observing the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist, and are formed in fidelity, hospitality, and true joy.
3. To explore how easily church practices are co-opted or deformed by the very consumerist values we should be resisting.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Share the story of the American college students who chose the Coca Cola jingle to represent their culture to students from other countries. It begins, “Historian Lendol Calder recalls from college days the following ‘icebreaker’ event at a Christian camp” (*Consumerism*, p. 32).

Conclude with Mark Medley’s observation: “Calder’s memory is a disturbing story because it reveals consumerism to be an ethos, a character-cultivating way of life, a way of life that constructs or ‘sells’ identity.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members may grow into their new identity in Christ as members of God’s Body and experience the joy that comes through fidelity to God and one another.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Consumerism as a character-cultivating way of life: engaging in its practices of excessive consumption changes the sort of persons that we are. Observing the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist, is likewise a character-shaping practice, but it is counter-cultural and opposed to our formation by consumerist practices.

The Eucharist is opposed to consumerist lifestyles in two important ways. First, it encourages traits of fidelity, hospitality, and proper joy derived from a relationship with God; these are opposite of some traits encouraged by consumerism—fickleness (“being committed to being uncommitted”), self-centeredness and aggression toward others, and covetousness of material things. Second, the Eucharist reminds

us that we *receive* our true identity (as a member of God's Body) as a gift, rather than seize it or obtain it by merit. Consumerism tempts us to think that we *create* (and change) our real identity by consumption of "brands," or *earn* our identity as a consumer when we obtain the resources to purchase products. So, the opposition is not only at the first level of what sort of person we shall become, but at the second level of how we are related to our true identity (as one who receives of a gracious gift, or one who earns a treasured and competitive prize).

This rivalry between the Eucharist and the character-forming practices of the consumerist culture shows up in another way. The Lord's Supper is easily distorted by the very consumerist traits the church should be resisting. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians highlights this fact by condemning that church's self-centered, competitive approach to the table, but nevertheless recommending that when the Lord's Supper is consumed rightly, it bears the power to shape their identities anew.

The final remarks by Barry Harvey should encourage members to consider how other practices of the church are threatened by consumerist values.

Study Questions

1. The divisions among the members indicate the Corinthians were not really eating the *Lord's* supper (1 Corinthians 11:20). Probably the church met in the homes of the rich, and they competed to provide lavish meals for one another, but left little food for the poor ("those who have nothing," v. 22). In the *Lord's* supper, Paul says, Jesus *shares* the bread and wine, and thereby *shares himself*. In taking the supper, we *proclaim the Lord's death*—that is, we gladly acknowledge that our salvation and true good depends upon his death, and is not something we accomplish for ourselves. Thus all of us are equally dependent upon and equally nourished by his body and blood.
2. Encourage members to reflect on how often and when the Supper is observed. The manner of passing the bread and wine may accentuate the theme of hospitality and concern for others. Some churches have special offerings for the needy at the end of their observance. Members may mention particular scripture readings, hymns, testimonies, or sermons that accented the themes described in this study.
3. Heidi Hornik comments on a visual element of Turner's painting: "As viewers we are led to the temple from this outer courtyard by a strong diagonal light, but these human figures meld into a wall or blockade between us and the temple entrance. The religious authorities, who exploit the sincerity of the worshipers for financial gain, were a problem then as they may be now" (p. 50). Jesus is depicted as clearing a path through the confusing blockade.
4. Encourage members to prayerfully consider the practices of their own congregation as well as the noted excesses reported in other congregations, such as a "health and wealth" message, an emphasis on entertainment and neglect of confession in worship, or a "life-style" approach to attract a particular clientele. He quotes Budde and Brimlow's concern that the most pressing question "is not whether capitalist culture will continue to shape hearts and imaginations more thoroughly than the Way of the Cross, but whether the church will produce people able to tell the difference between the two" (p. 89). In other words, the church might mistake the expectations of the consumerist culture with Jesus' demands, and the 'success' of its advertising and marketing strategies with people's deep and transforming acceptance of the Gospel.
5. Perhaps these appeals reveal how thin our conception of patriotism is. Is the only sacrifice required today that we take on a bit more consumer debt? Is our commitment to the common good reduced to a duty to increase the quarterly sales figures of major companies?

Departing Hymn

"O God, You Own a Thousand Hills" is on pp. 52-53 of *Consumerism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

More Like Mephibosheth

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on how consumerism is a culture of expectation, encouraging us to be suspicious and demanding not only in our consumption, but in relationships with one another and with God.
2. To evaluate Mephibosheth's example of a more humble and grateful response to life.
3. To evaluate "talking back to the tube" and other ways of resisting the distortion of our expectations by television programming and advertising.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Share Laura Singleton's story of her argument in the supermarket. It begins, "My words were slightly whiny, but my tone was firm: 'But this coupon doesn't say it can't be used with another coupon'" (*Consumerism*, p. 39). This episode exemplifies our consumerist tendencies to be cynical about goods and services, and to have exaggerated expectations. It was not, she concludes, a Mephibosheth moment.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read responsively together the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask four group members to read 2 Samuel 4:4; 9:1-13; 16:1-4; and 19:24-30 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Members may be unfamiliar with Mephibosheth (meh-FIB'-o-SHETH), whose strange story is spread across fifteen chapters of Second Samuel. Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, David's dear friend, and grandson of King Saul. After David secured the throne from Saul, he took Mephibosheth into his home (Samuel 9:1-13). The King, no doubt, had mixed motives when he befriended Mephibosheth; perhaps David intended to keep close watch on this rival for his throne. Later David's son, Absalom, led a palace revolt that forced the King to flee Jerusalem. This is when Ziba, Mephibosheth's self-promoting servant, lied to the King about his master (16:1-4); Ziba said Mephibosheth had stayed in Jerusalem because he wanted to become king in David's place. David promised Mephibosheth's possessions to Ziba, and only offered to return half of them to Mephibosheth after hearing his side of the story about not accompanying David into exile from the city (19:24-30).

Singleton recommends that we should be "a little more like Mephibosheth," not exactly like him. She sees him as a model for expecting less and being more grateful for what we receive. Encourage members to discuss elements of his attitude that they do not admire.

Brett Dewey explores how television fosters the attitude of impatient and cynical expectation that Singleton decries. As time permits, ask members to consider how they can minimize this influence of TV on their attitudes.

Study Questions

1. We may appreciate his loyalty to David and genuine gratitude for the unmerited favor of the King. Mephibosheth does not need to be the center of attention; he is content with David's generous provision. On the other hand, his language may seem to us to be groveling or servile.
2. Members may discuss our increasingly unrealistic expectations of church, job, home, and mate. For example, people talk about "shopping around" for a good (or better) church, and they compare the music, preaching, and ministries at their current church to what they hear about other churches. Some church may be the "place to be seen," and we may be tempted to change our membership like putting on the latest designer clothing. Or, to take another example, some people are always dissatisfied with where they work. They may see some places to work or positions as more attractive simply because others desire them too; then they become dissatisfied when that job's newness wears off.

Singleton worries that we will reduce our relationship to the God of the universe to simply a provider of everything we expect—from a close-in parking space at Wal-Mart to a promotion at work. "I find, indeed, that God's Word promises me great things—the Lord's return, my own resurrection to eternity with Him, and a new heaven and a new earth, to name just a few. But a smooth connection through O'Hare Airport? It doesn't seem to be my birthright, even as a child of the King" (p. 43).

3. Members might mention new products—foods, clothes, furniture, electronics, vacation destinations—that they learned about from television in the last year. Have they gleaned design concepts, fashion ideas, or product recommendations from watching TV? Did they buy something on impulse after seeing it advertised or used on television? What cable television channels do they think are oriented toward promoting products and services to viewers? Do their children learn about products from television?

Encourage members to inventory the 'space' in their home in relation to their television set(s). How many and how large are the televisions? Where are they located? Do they dominate a room? Does the placement of other furniture emphasize the TV's importance? How often is the TV turned on? Do family members watch or listen to it from several rooms?

4. Encourage members to mention specific commercials or programs that they would criticize. Is a certain product's relation to our happiness exaggerated? Does a particular broadcast make an expensive purchase too significant? Are universities, churches, politicians, political parties, or charities 'puffed' in certain commercials? Do some shows paint an unrealistic picture of the 'good life' that leaves out the dependent, disabled, elderly, or very young from consideration?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Beyond Candy Cane Lane

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the commercialization of Christmas in North America grew from an attempt to replace raucous public parties with family celebrations and gift-giving.
2. To explore the meaning of Christmas within the church year.
3. To evaluate our Christmas gift-giving in light of the biblical call to live self-controlled, godly lives which reflect God's righteousness and equity toward all people.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate the hymn "What Child is This?" in your church's hymnal.

Begin with a Story

Share Matthew Schobert's description of Candy Cane Lane: "In a small town not far from where I grew up in southern Illinois, immediately following Thanksgiving a typical middle-class neighborhood transforms into Candy Cane Lane—the region's largest display of lights, seasonal greetings, holiday characters, and manger scenes Spectator-packed vehicles throng to tour this street and admire its decorations. The diffuse glow in the surrounding night sky over Candy Cane Lane that marks the celebratory excess of America's real religion, consumer capitalism, obscures the radiance of the Infant's star" (*Consumerism*, p. 77).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close by asking God to train us to be the sort of givers who reflect God's own gift-giving in Jesus Christ.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read aloud Psalm 96 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The strain of living Christ-like lives within a consumerist culture is nowhere more apparent than in our celebration of the Christmas season. Invite members to brainstorm on the many ways in which the festivities have been commercialized. They might mention the pressures to sponsor and attend extravagant parties, lavishly decorate our houses inside and out, extend gift-giving into the workplace, use gift-giving to advance business interests, shop repeatedly and often for "bargains," measure our gifts by their "suggested list price," anticipate and meet our children's inflated desires for the season, and gauge our gift-giving practices by the standards in the community.

This study focuses on the commercialization of Christmas gift-giving to family and friends. The brief historical background on this practice (see *Consumerism*, pp. 77-78) will help members understand how we arrived at “Candy Cane Lane.” From Psalm 96 and Titus 2:11-14 we can draw biblical standards to evaluate our current practices of gift-giving: they should reflect God’s concern for righteousness and equity for all peoples, and they be “good deeds” that are self-controlled, righteous, and godly. That is, our Christmas gift-giving (1) should be for our family and friends’ good, rather than for personal display or “buying their love” (in desperate attempts to replace a lack of our continuous love and support for them); and (2) reflect our concern for righteousness and equity for all peoples. Christmas gift-giving is an opportunity for us to practice giving to others as God has given to us in Christ Jesus.

If we fear that simplifying our gift-giving will lessen the joy of Christmas, Katie Cook points us to Jesus, Francis of Assisi, and the character of Fezziwig in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, as those who can teach us to create and enjoy festivity on a dime. “They knew how to celebrate without shutting their eyes to the terribly real pain all around them.”

Study Questions

1. To the question, “What child is this?” the first verse responds that Jesus is “the King” of the world whom we, like the angels and shepherds, should laud, or praise. The third verse completes this thought by inviting peasants and kings to “own,” or acknowledge, his kingship.

Yet the full meaning of Jesus’ kingship requires this striking transition in the second verse: Jesus is both the creator of the universe, “the Word,” and its redeemer, “the Word made flesh.” Suddenly the sinners, who are sincerely pleading for mercy in Advent and Lent, are joined in their plea by the Lord of the universe: “for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.” The mystery of this is not explained, but exemplified on Good Friday: “Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.” In the carol, the baby Jesus’ birth, and the joy and worship that it elicits, make sense only when placed in the larger context of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

2. Members may discuss how we ‘lose control’ of our gift-giving, not only buying more than we can afford, but also giving others more than it is good for them to receive. Perhaps our gifts actually draw attention away from the good news of Christmas—the coming of the King who reigns in righteousness and equity.

If we keep family gift-giving as a central part of Christmas festivities, how can we practice “self-control” that is “upright and godly”? Schobert recommends fair-trade gifts because they remind the giver and recipient of the needs of others in the world; they can express not only the giver’s love for family and friends, but also concern for righteousness and equity for all peoples. Other gifts that accomplish this include: (1) honoring a recipient by giving a gift that serves others in her name—e.g., by an animal purchased through Heifer International, or donation to The Salvation Army, Oxfam, or other Christian aid society; (2) endorsing and supporting a recipient’s short-term mission work or charity work; and (3) limiting the amount spent on Christmas gifts within the family or circle of friends, so that they can afford to serve others collectively, perhaps by offering hospitality to someone who is new in the community or will celebrate a Christmas without family or friends.

Encourage members to discuss ways to lower the cost of Christmas giving, or to replace purchased gifts entirely with creative gifts to one another of time and assistance.

3. Fezziwig knows the secret of providing happiness without great financial cost. Perhaps the details are in the planning of the party, the choosing of the gifts, and the sincere, personal involvement in the lives of the recipients. Like Jesus and Francis, Fezziwig invited some of the people at the margins in his community. How can members throw this sort of party?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.