

1 Sermon, August 26, 2012

Texts: Mark 12:28-34, John 21:15-19, Galatians 5:13-23

Title: "Christianity Compared: Self-Acceptance in Christianity and Consumerism"

1. Is consumerism a religious faith?
2. Consumerism is the primary means of the pursuit of happiness.
3. Consumerism teaches self-acceptance as long as you buy
4. Christian faith teaches self-acceptance because God loves you
5. Christian faith is not materialistic

1. Is consumerism a religious faith?

Consider the theory that a society is known for its greatest buildings.

In ancient days, these buildings would have been temples and palaces.

In medieval Europe, the largest building in town would be the cathedral. It was rare that the church spire would not be the tallest thing in town.

What are our most magnificent buildings today? Football stadiums? The Mall of America? The pentagon? Office skyscrapers? In today's world, churches are no longer the biggest thing in most cities. We look up (literally) to insurance companies, investment firms, and banks – with the bottom floor or two dedicated to shopping.

What does that tell us? What do we worship?

Peter House, a Unitarian minister wrote, about ten years ago:

"I grew up watching television, as did most people my age. I even watched ALL MY CHILDREN and AS THE WORLD TURNS every weekday that I wasn't in school. I can still tell you who Erica's first husband was and why Bob and Lisa were divorced. But I also still remember that four out of five dentists surveyed recommended sugarless gum for their patients who chew gum. I can still recall that CERTS is made with a drop of retsin (but I don't know what retsin IS). And I know that in hardest water CALGON helps detergents get laundry up to 30% cleaner. I did no research for these facts. I remember it all twenty-five or thirty years after I first heard it - just like the advertisers wanted me to.

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“I often tell people that I was raised Catholic when they ask me what religious tradition I was raised in. But I really should tell them that I was raised CONSUMERIST. I can rattle off advertising copy quicker than I can the passages from the Baltimore Catechism that I memorized. And I'm sure that the advertising slogans I just used are familiar to most.

“Consumerism permeates our society and in many ways it is the religion of America. James Luther Adams, a Unitarian theologian, maintained that all people have a religion whether they realize it or not. ‘The question,’ he writes, ‘is not shall I be a person of faith, but rather, which faith should BE mine? For whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement; whether the person lives for God, country, science, or plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, showing confidence in something. Find out what he gives his deepest loyalty to and you've found his religion.’”

2. Consumerism is the primary means of the pursuit of happiness.

In some ways, consumerism is written right into our country's founding documents. The Declaration of Independence states that humans “are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Think about that. The Declaration of Independence says that **God** has given us the right to pursue happiness!

And how do most people pursue happiness? By spending money. You could, without too much stretching, think that the Declaration of Independence says that God wants us to spend money.

Skye Jethani wrote in Leadership Journal (a publication of Christianity Today):

“... shopping is the number one leisure activity of Americans. It occupies a role in society that once belonged only to religion - the power to give meaning and construct identity. Consumerism, as Pete Ward correctly concludes, “represents an alternative source of meaning to the Christian gospel.” No longer merely an economic system, consumerism has become the American worldview - the framework through which we interpret everything else, including God, the gospel, and church.

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When we approach Christianity as consumers rather than seeing it as a comprehensive way of life, an interpretive set of beliefs and values, Christianity becomes just one more brand we consume along with Gap, Apple, and Starbucks to express identity. And the demotion of Jesus Christ from Lord to label means to live as a Christian no longer carries an expectation of obedience and good works, but rather the perpetual consumption of Christian merchandise and experiences - music, books, t-shirts, conferences, and jewelry.

Approaching Christianity as a brand (rather than a worldview) explains why the majority of people who identify themselves as born-again Christians live no differently than other Americans. According to George Barna, most churchgoers have not adopted a biblical worldview, they have simply added a Jesus fish on the bumper of their unregenerate consumer identities. As Mark Riddle observes, "Conversion in the U.S. seems to mean we've exchanged some of our shopping at Wal-Mart, Blockbuster, and Borders for the Christian bookstore down the street. We've taken our lack of purchasing control to God's store, where we buy our office supplies in Jesus name."

3. Consumerism teaches self-acceptance as long as you buy

You may not agree that consumerism is a religion, but think for a minute; what makes you feel good?

Is it primarily related to spending money? Do you feel best when you're going out to eat or going on a trip, or buying something new?

Or do you feel best when you pray or have conversations or spend time in nature?

The impulse to feel good about consuming has become implanted deeply in our souls.

I remember getting new shoelaces for a pair of tennis shoes that I liked. The tennis shoes were worn, but the new shoelaces made them look much better. I was irrationally pleased.

Such a silly thing – new shoelaces. Why should I be pleased about new shoelaces?

I think what pleased me about the new shoelaces is that I thought I outsmarted the system. Something very cheap made something more expensive good again.

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It's the same kind of victory people feel when they find a bargain in a rummage sale. It's like victory over the system that charges too much.

I also remember a neighbor who bought a Kirby vacuum cleaner. He talked the salesperson down a couple of hundred dollars off the purchase price, and felt he was getting a very good deal.

It's like a competitive victory. "I won!"

Most of us have felt that. And it's not really winning unless we can tell someone else the great bargain we got, the way we got these things on sale, the way we outsmarted the system.

It's a good feeling, but does it last very long?

Does the good feeling about a bargain last more than a day? Does it even last a whole day?

What if we found out that a friend got another 2% off that bargain? Would we immediately feel defeated?

Consumption gives us a good feeling, but it's a very short-lived contentment.

There is a certain level of self-acceptance in consumerist religion. I accept myself as long as I feel that I have been successful in obtaining the things I feel I need.

Whether I really need them or not is another question.

4. Christian faith teaches self-acceptance because God loves you

Christian faith, on the other hand, teaches self-acceptance not based on any external standard, but simply because God loves us.

God's love is undeserved, and never goes away.

The challenge for a Christian in this society is that the consumerist message is much more prevalent than the Christian message.

Christianity is not about feeling good; it's about faithfulness and trust.

Christian faith is about what Jesus said:

"... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

The second commandment is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

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In a consumerist mindset, everything is about results. Did I win? Did I get the bargain? Did I out-compete my neighbor for the prize? Does my makeup make me look better than my neighbor? Does my car make me look cooler than my neighbor?

Christian faith is about putting all that aside, and loving my neighbor as I love myself.

Incidentally, that means I need to love myself, and not just my stuff or my victories.

5. Christian faith is not materialistic

The gospel of John tells us that after the resurrection, Jesus gathered with his disciples by the side of Lake Galilee. He had breakfast with them. His question was not: "Have you been successful in making disciples?"

His question was: "Do you love me?"

Jesus didn't measure his disciples by results. He measured them by love.

Let's do the same. Let's measure ourselves, not by results, but by love.

Amen.