

Disengaging from the story of stuff

1. Biblical reflection: The “Rich Ruler” and Zacchaeus
2. Consumerism: What is it?
3. So what’s wrong with consumerism?
4. Practical steps for disengagement
5. Further reading

Luke 18:18–30

A certain ruler asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.'"

He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth."

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" He replied, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God."

Then Peter said, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

1. Biblical Reflection

What’s your “gut reaction” to this story? What emotions does it trigger?

What do you think the Ruler wanted from Jesus? Did he get what he was after?

Did the Ruler think he lacked anything? Would the onlookers have thought that he lacked anything?

What did Jesus think the Ruler lacked?

“All these I have kept since I was a boy.” In what ways is it easier for rich people to keep commandments like “You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and mother”?

Luke 19:1–9: Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

It's no accident that the story of Zacchaeus follows so soon after the Rich Ruler. Do a quick "compare and contrast" of the two stories. What do they have in common? How do they differ?

What do you think Zacchaeus wanted from Jesus? Did he get what he was after?

"Today salvation has come to this house". How could Jesus be so confident that Zacchaeus believed?

What about us?

Think about mainstream Australian culture: Do we think that we lack anything? What might Jesus think we lack?

What about Australian Christians: Do we think that we lack anything? What might Jesus think we lack? If an alien anthropologist arrived to study our lifestyle, what differences (if any) would they find between Christians and the broader Australian population?

2. Consumerism: What is it?

"Consumerism is a social and economic order that encourages an acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts." (I got that from Wikipedia, so it's authoritative!)

It's an "ism".

Just like other famous "isms" (Anglicanism, Catholicism, Judaism, Hinduism, Capitalism, Communism), consumerism seeks to answer the big questions of existence: What does it mean to live a good life? How do I find meaning and fulfilment? It's worth noting that consumerism has achieved truly global influence. No matter where you go in the world, regardless of the local cultural history and religion, consumerism is the dominant story that drives people's hopes and aspirations.

The story of stuff

Crudely put, consumerism is a story that urges us to find our meaning, status and satisfaction in the stuff that we buy. According to this story the purpose of life is

to make money so we can spend it on goods and experiences that not only make life easier and more enjoyable, but also display to others how successful and admirable we are. We express our individuality, our social standing and our values through the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, where we live, where we go to school and how we use our leisure time.



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The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats - his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies. These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency.

Victor Lebow: Journal of Retailing, Spring 1955

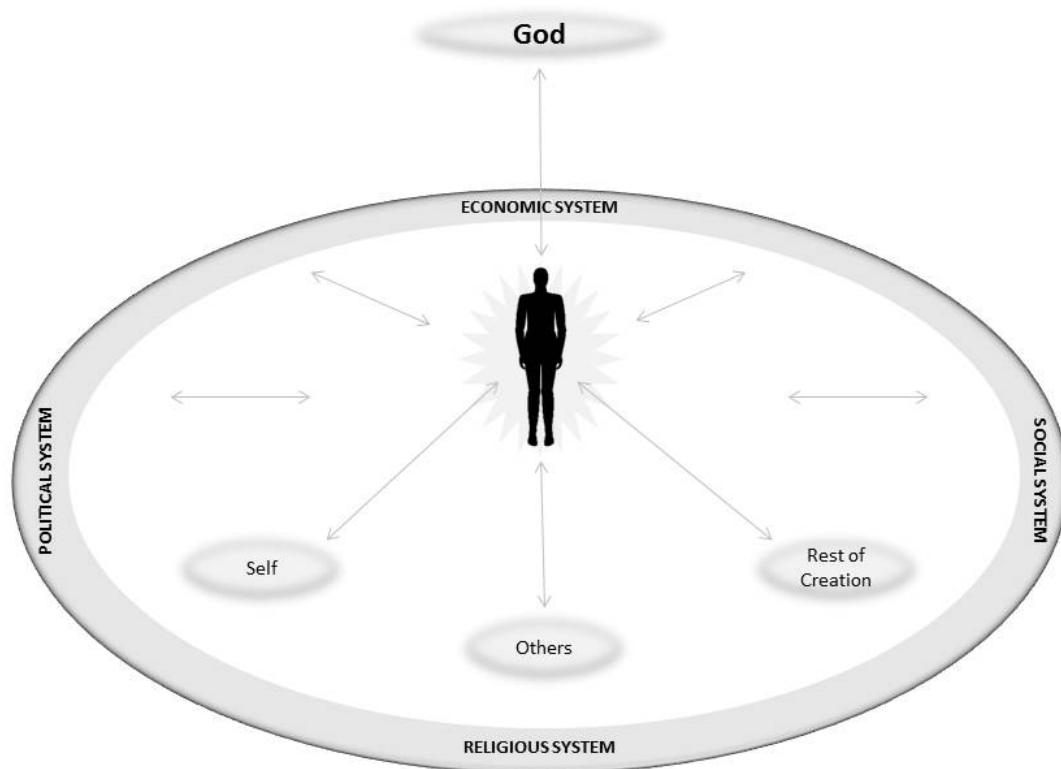
If we want to hold our market share then we've got to put messages out there to convince people that they're doing the right thing buying our clients' product.

Don Jeffrey: Australian advertising executive

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3. So what's wrong with consumerism?

A helpful way to critique consumerism as a way of life is through the lens of the “four vital relationships” developed by Bryant Myers in *Walking With the Poor*:

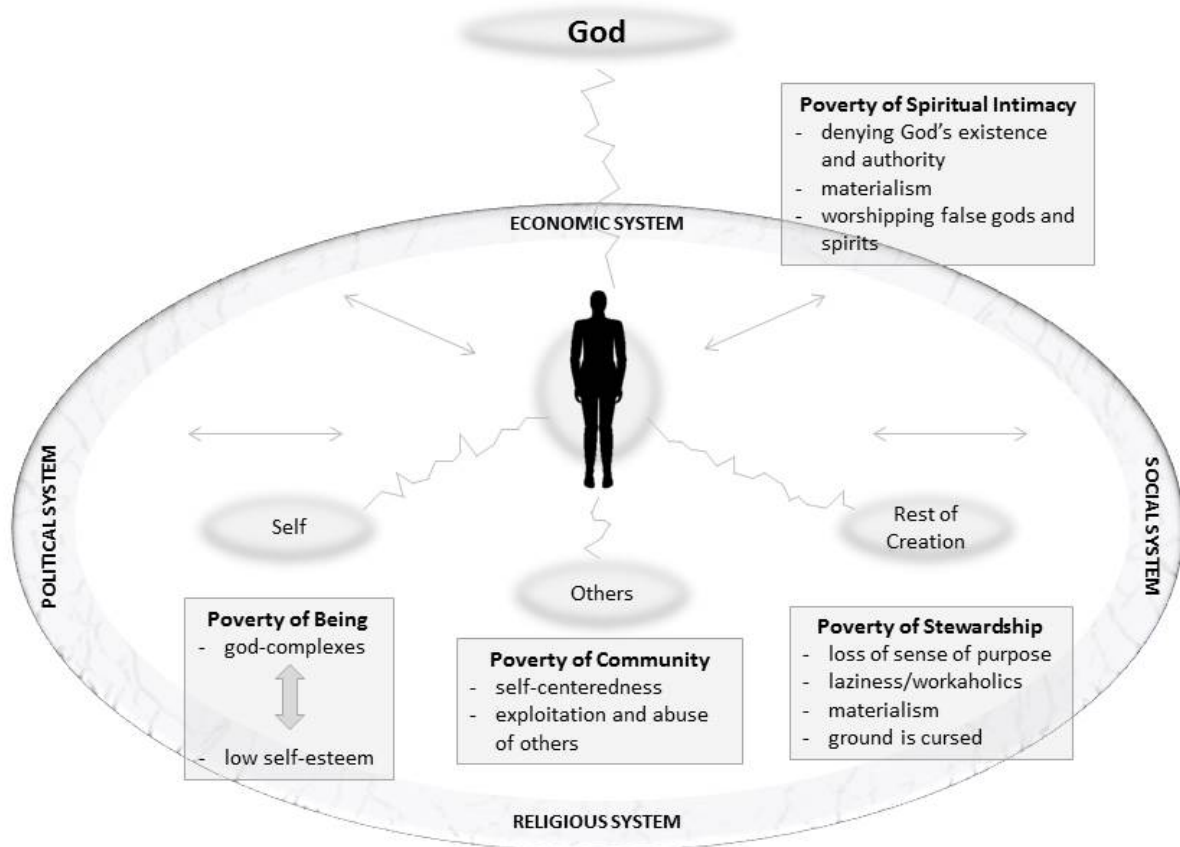


Adapted from Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts. How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself* (Moody Publishers, 2009), 57

The biblical narrative locates our identity, worth and vocation in our principal relationship with the God who called the universe into being. We are formed in God's image and given dominion over the Earth to keep and care for it on God's behalf. Humans are called to “co-create and procreate”, to extend God's rule over chaos and darkness.

Out of this “vertical” relationship flow three “horizontal” relationships: With self, others and the rest of creation. As communities develop, systems emerge (themselves essentially networks of relationships) to ensure that all creation flourishes and prospers. Genesis gives us a brief glimpse of the wholeness God intended for creation, summed up in the Hebrew word Shalom.

Unfortunately we know how the story goes. Fooled into believing that God cannot be trusted, we chose to judge good and evil for ourselves. Our relationship with God is polluted by a pervasive sense of guilt, fear and shame. The brokenness of that fundamental relationship taints our other 3 vital relationships. Our “poverty of being” expresses itself in problems such as idolatry, excess, existential angst and poor mental health. Our relationships with others, and with creation, become self-seeking, exploitative and abusive. And the systems which should work for Shalom become twisted in favour of the rich and powerful, at the expense of the weak and vulnerable. In this sense, consumerism is essentially a current expression of these broken relationships and failed systems.



Adapted from Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts. How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself* (Moody Publishers, 2009), 61

Poverty of Being:

“ American tycoon Nelson Rockefeller was once asked “How much money does a man need to be happy?” He replied: “Just a little more.”

The consumer society, directed at making us happy, achieves the opposite. It encourages us to spend money we do not have, to buy things we do not need, for the sake of happiness that will not last. By constantly directing our attention to what we do not have, instead of making us thankful for what we do have, it becomes a highly effective system for the production and distribution of unhappiness.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* ”

Economists tell us that we're living in an era of unparalleled prosperity. Never have so many people enjoyed such a lavish lifestyle as we do today, especially here in Australia (<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/countries-wealth-per-capita/>). We have better food, better education, better communication, better health, bigger houses, nicer cars, greater choice, more entertainment, more travel opportunities, than any other time in human history. We've never had it so good!

And yet ... at the same time, the vital signs of life - our social and emotional indicators - aren't good:

- Suicide is the most common cause of death in Australians under 45 by a considerable margin (nearly twice as much as any other cause) and the largest non-medical cause <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/life-expectancy-death/deaths-in-australia/data>
- Anxiety and depression are widespread - Australian consumption of antidepressants is the second highest in the OECD (>10% of population), and their use has trebled since 2000. <http://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance-19991312.htm>
- 2/3 of Australians are overweight/obese - 7th highest in the OECD. <http://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance-19991312.htm>

Clearly, all our wealth isn't increasing our happiness or sense of wellbeing. On the contrary, our high-consumption, throwaway culture is actually sucking the life out of us.

Poverty of Community:

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We have been told a story that casts us in the role of consumers, people who merely take in products that were made far away. The reality is that as human beings we make choices, and the choices we make around what we wear are having profound implications for our planet as well as for some of our most vulnerable fellow human beings.

Andrew Morgan

I pity the man who wants a coat so cheap that the man or woman who produces the cloth will starve in the process.

Benjamin Harrison

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Obviously our demand for cheap goods impacts others. The Rana Plaza tragedy in Bangladesh in 2013 highlighted the way global trade essentially exports manufacturing to countries where labour is cheap, safety and welfare regulations are minimal and environmental controls non-existent. Even when human trafficking isn't involved, the social cost of men, women and children performing dirty, dangerous and demeaning tasks, often spending weeks or even months away from their communities, is inestimable. <https://www.ethical.org.au/get-informed/issues1/>

Poverty of Stewardship:

We require not only “forced draft” consumption, but “expensive” consumption as well. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption.

Victor Lebow: Journal of Retailing, Spring 1955

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I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that.

Gus Speth, US Government climate advisor

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Australia has the highest per capita carbon emissions in the world (16.2T/pp/pa; <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/each-countrys-share-co2-emissions>). If everyone in the world lived like a typical Australian, we would need four Earths to sustain their lifestyle.

(<http://data.footprintnetwork.org>)

Our throwaway culture is placing huge pressure on the earth's resources, causing pollution and problems with waste disposal. Widespread clearing and industrial agricultural techniques are causing soil degradation, while habitat reduction is driving ever more species to the brink of extinction.

<https://soe.environment.gov.au/theme/overview/framework/risks>

<https://www.soe.epa.nsw.gov.au/all-themes/biodiversity>

(And most importantly) Poverty of Spiritual Intimacy:

“ *Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms.*

Victor Lebow: Journal of Retailing, Spring 1955

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

Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.

Jesus of Nazareth ”

Consumerism is driven by a hugely profitable marketing industry, bombarding us with advertising every minute of our waking day. PwC forecasts that spending on marketing in Australia will reach \$23 billion by 2023 (<https://www.adnews.com.au/news/pwc-australia-s-advertising-spend-will-grow-to-23-billion-by-2023>). Ads work on two levels: They aim to sell us a product by first selling us a lifestyle. They urge us to find our meaning, identity, lifestyle, status, hope, intimacy, freedom, even morals, through the things we buy.

If we're feeling sad, lonely or out of sorts, no problem - all we need to do is head to the local shopping mall for a bit of "retail therapy". Malls are expertly designed by teams of engineers and psychologists to disorient us, distort our sense of time and drive us to purchase objects we didn't know we wanted or needed. Sociologist George Ritzer accurately refers to them as "Cathedrals of Consumption".

At its heart, consumerism is a form of idolatry. Our fundamental relationship with God has been replaced by the story of stuff. The first step in counter-consumerism is therefore to re-establish and strengthen our connection with our Creator, praying that we can find our sense of meaning, value, worth and purpose in God.

4. Practical steps for disengagement

Consumerism vs Consumption

It's important to acknowledge that, unless we're living a subsistence "off the grid" lifestyle, we need to consume. We need things like food, clothing, shelter and transport to survive and function in society. Things only get out of hand when the means of living become the meaning of life. As Tim Keller says "(idolatry) means turning a good thing into an ultimate thing".

It's also worth remembering that it's ok to treat ourselves occasionally - we don't have to be totally stingy! Eating out to celebrate a birthday or special achievement, going to a movie or a play, grabbing some takeaway, having a weekend away are all fine. But they tend to lose their magic if, rather than being special occasions, they become regular occurrences.

Consume less

- In our hyper-consumerist culture a worthwhile spiritual discipline to develop is the ability to ask “Do I really need this?” Do I have enough clothes already? Do I need a new car? Is my existing furniture still perfectly functional?
- Ask yourself “How often will I use it? Would it make more sense to borrow or hire one instead? Do I know someone who might be interested in going halves and sharing?”
- Join your local library
- Explore public transport/car hire/taxis/Uber/GoGet as an alternative to an extra car.
- Repair/restore rather than replacing – find your local repair café (<https://repaircafesydneynorth.net/>, <https://bower.org.au/>)

Consume better

- Buy things second hand: eBay, Gumtree, Vinnies, Salvos
- See what you can get for free. Check out the freecycle network <https://www.freecycle.org/>
- Dumpster diving for hardcore anticonsumerists
- Shop ethically:
 - * The Ethical Shopping Guide: <https://www.ethical.org.au>
 - * <https://baptistworldaid.org.au/resources/2019-ethical-fashion-guide/>
 - * <https://upliftfairtrade.com.au/>
 - * <https://etiko.com.au/>
 - * Tea, Coffee and Chocolate: <https://www.tradewinds.org.au/>
 - * <https://tribesandnations.com.au/>
- Tissues, paper towel and toilet paper: <https://au.whogivesacrap.org/>
- By local at your nearest grower’s market <https://www.sydneymarkets.com.au/markets/growers-market/growers-overview.html>
- Join a veggie co-op: <https://www.boxdivvy.com/>
- Sign up for green electricity: <https://www.greenelectricityguide.org.au/>
- Switch your superannuation and other investments to an ethical fund: <https://www.australianethical.com.au/>, <https://www.ethinvest.com.au/>
- Pest control <https://www.systemspest.com.au/>
- Sometimes it’s better to spend more on a quality product that will last, rather than a cheap item that will wear out quickly and end up in landfill. A bit of research pays off!

Replace consuming with producing and creating

- Grow something – flowers, veggies, chooks
- Bake something
- Make something – knit, crochet, build, restore, start a hobby
- Create something – paint, sculpt, write, play games, play an instrument, sing, design, doodle
- Join a club, choir, church or other association
- Find meaning and purpose in other things - relationships, volunteering, study
- Reduce waste – recycle, compost

5. Further Reading

Books:

[Affluenza](#) by Clive Hamilton

[An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture](#) by Block / Brueggemann / McKnight

[Counterfeit Gods](#) by Tim Keller

[Coming Back to Earth & Coming Home](#) by Jonathan Cornford

[The Trouble With Paris: Following Jesus in a World of Plastic Promises](#) by Mark Sayers

[No Logo](#) by Naomi Klein

[The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and our Health - and a Vision for Change](#) by Annie Leonard

[The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning](#) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Websites/Blogs/podcasts/TED talks:

<http://www.mannagum.org.au/>

<https://upliftfairtrade.com.au/blogs/news-and-stories>

<https://www.facebook.com/Ethinvest/>

https://www.ted.com/talks/paul_piff_does_money_make_you_mean?language=en

https://www.tearfund.org/en/about_you/action/the_world_rebooted/

<https://www.theminimalists.com/podcast/>

<https://slowyourhome.com/the-slow-home-podcast/>

<https://www.becomingminimalist.com/>

<https://www.verdant.net/society.htm>

<https://www.wwf.org.au/get-involved/change-the-way-you-live/ecological-footprint-calculator#gs.6xtsti>

<https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/get-involved/how-rich-am-i/>