

[1 Sprang and Jacob polaroid] A few weeks ago, my oldest son Jacob got sick so he couldn't go to daycare which meant we got to spend the day together, hanging out watching Netflix and doing some coloring. I was getting ready in the bathroom and Jacob came in said, "Daddy! I ate 2 yogurts." And I was like, "Did mommy get them before she left?" And he said, "No. I got them."

All I could say was, "That's awesome buddy!" He went back in the other room while I basked in the proud glow of fatherhood. Since he had been sick in the night, his stomach was empty, so he was hungry. He went to the refrigerator, got the go-gurt out of the box, went to the silverware drawer got the scissors out, cut the top off the go-gurt and ate it. Then did it again. This kid is growing up. Hold back the tears.

When he was a baby, we provide everything for him. As a little human, he was completely vulnerable and needed someone to look after his every need. And so we did. We sacrificed and got your hands dirty to make sure that he was taken care of. But as he's gotten older, he is able to do things on his own. And we feel pretty accomplished that he can survive without us for a little bit.

Some parents in the room are replaying a similar they-did-it-for-themselves moment in your mind. Or maybe if you don't have kids, you can remember back when that moment was for you. When you went off to college, or when you got your first apartment. Or when you got your first job and you spent your own money on something. It was a big moment right? A moment that meant you had arrived at another level of growing up.

While I was still glowing with pride at my sons achievement, he came in again and said, "Daddy! I ate 5 yogurts!"

Now, yogurt isn't the worst thing to eat when your body is recovering from sickness. But 5 yogurts is overdoing it, right? And this wasn't the first time that he'd shown a tendency to want more than he needs. He got new games for Christmas, and the next day he wanted to get a new game. Or the other day when he said, "I hope mommy surprises me with 100 games on her phone." But I know, as his father, that even if he got all those things, he would still want more.

[2 commercials on tv screens] Some of this is because he watches all these videos on YouTube of kids playing new games and toys all the time. He sees these kids with all the new things and he wants to have the new things. When I was a kid, it was the toy commercials during Saturday morning cartoons. But they didn't stop when I grew up. The commercials just are about different things.

The advertising industry uses anything and everything to get you thinking, talking and hopefully buying their products. They uses puppies, monkeys, babies... or all of the above. But they aren't just selling their product with these ads. They're saying that if you get this product, your life will be better. And while I know in my head it's a lie, my life won't be better if I eat that Monster burger from Carl's Jr, or get that new TV (even though I have 3 TVs already), I find myself desiring those things.

So, it seems, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, right? Jacob's eating of the 5 yogurts revealed in me the tendency I have to overindulge, and overspend. Now that I'm grown up, and have my own income, and can decide what to do with it, am I always wanting that new thing? Maybe you're in a similar place, where you have all you need, but you still find yourself wanting more. Why is that?

Steve Quartz, co-author of "Cool: How the Brain's Hidden Quest for Cool Drives Our Economy and Shapes Our World" and a professor of philosophy and neuroscience at the California Institute of Technology, suggests that consuming ultimately isn't just about getting more, but about our desire to be accepted, and to have social esteem among our friends.

In a study that they did with Baylor College of Medicine they found that [3 QUOTE] "boosts in our social status also strongly activate the nucleus accumbens, a critical part of the brain's reward system that's implicated in almost all forms of addiction."

This system, where having the newest greatest thing is praised, and having last year's version is pitied, drives us to be consumers. Acceptance is like a drug. So we spend all our resources, even those we don't have, trying to gain that acceptance, all the while only contributing to what could be our own financial, emotional and relational demise. We live in a system that teaches us to spend on ourselves, that having more is the path to life. But that's not true. Life is found in giving, not amassing more. So the question of the day is: how are my resources (time, money, etc) contributing to the flourishing of the world?

I know that's hard to believe: the good life is actually found when we give away money and resources. And the main reason we have trouble with this is because we live in a system that has formed us to be consumers.

[4 ash wednesday fish graphic] These systemic evils are what we're examining this lent. Lent is the season in the Church year where we take confess Sin, repent and call to God for rescue. Our Lent series this year is called System Failure. We are taking a look at the Sin that is bigger than just what you and I do on an individual basis. These are all-encompassing systems that are hard to point out because they are so ingrained in our world as "the way things are." We've talked about it as describing water to a fish. They can't grasp it because it's all they've known. These systems form us to live a certain way that is counter to God's way, and therefore does not lead to life, but death.

[5 ash wednesday air valve graphic] Religion and faith can function in 2 ways. One way is as an air valve to release some of the pressure that's built up, but not really changing us. We see this in WWJD bibles, Christian tshirts, Christian hats, Christian teddy bears. It makes us feel good, because we spent our money on "christian" products, but all the while, we're still feeding the consumer machine.

On the other hand, religion and faith can function as a counter-community that points us toward life, and give us practices, habits, that form us into the people of God.

It seems the only way to avoid being caught up in consumerism is to completely detach from the culture, like our Mennonite and Amish sisters and brothers have done. Is that the only option?

For many of us, thinking about how we spend our money makes us feel guilty. Because we know that we have nice things, or that we want nicer things, and so we automatically feel guilty that we have them, we feel guilty that we don't give more to charities or help others. There's others here that are probably feeling a sense of skepticism about what could be coming next. Because if consuming is bad, then are we to stop buying things? Stop spending money? We should give all our money to the Church?

But that's actually not what we're saying here today. Actually, producing and growing our resources is a good thing. It's what we do with those resources that matters. God wants us to flourish.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a bible turn with me to Joshua 5. If you grabbed a bible from the back, it can be found on page XXX, and if you don't have a bible of your own, please feel free to keep that as a gift from us. At this point in the story, the Israelites have just entered the land promised to their ancestors. They had lived as nomads in the desert for 40 years. And if you're wondering how they were able to survive in the desert, God provided water from rocks, bread (called manna) in the mornings, and quail in the evenings. God provided for them. Every day they woke up with manna for them to pick up and eat.

So after those 40 years, they've arrived again. They are in the land again and are about to eat from the first harvest. And something very significant is going to happen.

Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the shame of your slavery in Egypt." So that place has been called Gilgal to this day.

While the Israelites were camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month. The very next day they began to eat unleavened bread and roasted grain harvested from the land. No manna appeared on the day they first ate from the crops of the land, and it was never seen again. So from that time on the Israelites ate from the crops of Canaan.

Joshua 5:9-12 (NLT)

This had to have been a great moment for them right? They were slaves for 400 years, then wandered in the desert for 40 more. Now, finally they are home. Not only are they in the land, but the land has produced food for them. It's significant to point out that before they ate from the harvest of the land, they took time to remember where they came from. They didn't just dive into eating, they retold the story of how God rescued them from Egypt and brought them to this land and now here we are. Whoo hoooo!

But I'm sure the next day was a little bittersweet. Why? The manna stopped. I'm sure it was surreal at first. For 40 years, God has been providing their every need. Every day, manna in the morning, quail in the evening. Every day, God provided. That's a pretty sweet deal. They didn't really have to do anything for it except pick it up off the ground. What's fascinating in this scene is the Israelites were able to gather enough food for a passover meal and eat off the land itself. This is a strong contrast from the scarcity of the desert wandering. God didn't need to put food on the ground in the Promised Land, because it was already abundant. Plenty to go around.

[8 side by side, person with falling bread / person carrying wheat] From this point forward they've gotta work. They have to till the ground, sow the seed, water, wait, harvest, mix, cook. All this before they can finally consume their food. God is inviting them to participate in their provision. God hasn't stopped providing food, it's just happening through the land that God has given them. The manna was never God's vision for humanity. It was necessary, but not the best. In order for humanity to flourish, the manna has to stop.

It's the difference between Jacob sitting at the table and us putting all his food in front of him, and him getting his yogurt out of the fridge. Megan and I went to the store and bought the

yogurt and put it in the fridge. All Jacob did was get it out of the fridge. But he participated. And I was proud.

It was time for the Israelites to grow up. God's desire is for humanity to flourish, and to do that, we partner, produce, and resource.

It sounds like God and Consumerism have the same goal for humanity. Consumerism wants us to flourish as well. Earn more and more so you can buy more and more. Get that status, get that acceptance, the good life is found here! And they make it so easy to participate. Credit cards, loyalty cards, store credit cards that give you discounts, the lottery, gambling, payday loans. All of these things are part of a system that continues to tell you that the good life is found in having more and more and more. So do whatever it takes to get, get, get.

But for many people in this community, and in this country, they've found the promise of the American Dream has ended up becoming a nightmare.

[9 side by side with persons taking arrows in labeled consumerism / persons giving, maybe arrows out/away labeled flourishing] If the consumer system's idea of flourishing forms us to spend everything we have on ourselves, God's idea of flourishing, the good life, is built around the common good. God gives us what we have not so we can build ourselves up, but so that we can build each other up. And to do that we have to be generous. This is how we love God and love others when it comes to our resources.

God gave the Israelites some very specific instructions about what they were and weren't supposed to do when they entered the land. One in particular had to do with how they harvested their crops and it shows you God's idea of how our resources are supposed to be handled.

When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. Leave it for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the LORD your God.
Leviticus 23:22 (NLT)

Don't harvest the edges, and don't pick up the dropped pieces. Leave them for those in need. The poor and the foreigners. This is what it looked like for the Israelites to not "spend everything you have on yourself." Or even more on point, this is the ancient equivalent to donating to a non-profit.

There it is again. You're thinking that I'm talking about giving more money to the church. And yes, if you believe in what God is doing here at Catalyst, we hope that make it point to give here. When we pool our resources together, we can do more good in the community. But what we really want you to do is follow your calling. What has God laid on your heart, and how can you support that cause?

But if we're like most Americans, living above our means, how is that even possible?

For the majority of Meagan's and my marriage, we have lived on a single income. She worked for about a year after we got married and then she went back to school to finish her degree. She worked for a few years after she graduated, and then we had Jacob, and then Zeke. We had a budget and followed it strictly. We had help from family every month to make it through the toughest of times. It was a really tight operation. But what was amazing is that we made it. I remember we heard a sermon one time about manna and it really hit home.

See the thing about manna is, God only gave them enough for that day. He said, “Don’t take more than for that day.” But, you know, they were humans just like us. They feared for the future. They struggled with trusting God. So some would get extra and store it, but the following day it had maggots in it. So, not edible. So that’s how manna works. God provides. Every day. But only enough for that day. And it was that way for 40 years. And I would not be surprised if every single night, from the first to the 14,599th, they went to bed with the thought, “I hope the manna comes tomorrow.”

Yeah it sounds all nice and good that God provided for them every day, until it’s you. And you’re wondering if you’re gonna be able to make it to the end of the month.

Then something happened. Meagan went back to work. And all of a sudden we had 2 incomes. And we had all of this extra money that we hadn’t had in a long time. And it’s great. It’s nice to be able to do some fun things that we couldn’t have done on one income. But the danger with abundance, is we could begin to think we owe it to ourselves to spend it all on stuff we want. That we desire it because we worked hard for it. It’s real easy to pick all the harvest, even to the edges, and even those off the ground, and keep it for ourselves. And to be honest, we’ve done a little of that. It’s hard to resist.

But we know, that is not the way to life. And we desire to be people that can resist consumerism and embrace the way of God.

Because with more income, we can help more people. With more income we have the opportunity to make a difference. To be more thoughtful, to be more generous. To be more conscious of the world around us.

Like all of these systemic evils, it’s hard to know how we can make a difference. It’s hard not to spend everything we have on what we want. It’s hard to give money away. When we like yogurt, we want to eat 5 of them.

But as a counter-community, we must be a place where living on a budget, downsizing, and simpler living are valued more than getting that new thing. If consumerism really is about acceptance, then we must be a place that accepts the thriftier lifestyles. A community that recognizes the resources we have, the crops that we are harvesting, are not just for us. This is why we regularly have special offerings to raise money for local organizations that are making a difference in the lives of those in need in our community.

If you find yourself living above your means, I would suggest starting with a budget. Figure out where your money is going so you know where you can adjust your spending to enable you to be more generous. If you are someone that struggles with credit card debt, consider going to a cash system. It hurts a lot worse when you have to pull out those greenbacks, it’ll make you think twice about making an unnecessary purchase. Or if you are someone that likes to impulse buy, consider instituting a 24-hour rule. Step away and if you still feel like you need this thing then get it. I’ve even heard of people that will freeze their credit card in a bowl of water so that they have to wait for the ice to melt before they can use it.

The goal here, again, is not just to have more money in the bank to spend on ourselves, but make it possible for us to be givers.

And beyond just financial resources, serving is a way to be generous with our time. It's why serving is one of our core values here at Catalyst. It's why our CGROUPs serve once a month. Why we ask all our parents to serve regularly in our kids rooms. Why we post volunteer needs of the church and the community. It's a reminder that our time is not just for us either, but we give our time to help the common good.

We flourish when we are generous. I've seen it in Jacob. He's at the age where he has started helping out with dinner, or picking up toys, or cleaning out the dishwasher. And when he wants to have a yogurt, he has started getting one out for his brother too. Because it makes *having* better when we can give to others.

So you have a choice. you can continue to go down the path toward consumerism. Be a cog in the system of the advertisers that will continue to tell you the good life is found in gaining more for yourself.

Or you can be a giver. Because that's where the good life is found. How would this change your marriage? your family? What could you do with those resources? What could you do with that time? If you did a budget and figured out that you could live on less money, would that give you an opportunity to pursue a calling that you have on your life? It's possible. But there's only one way to find out.

COMMUNION SETUP

It all starts at this communion table. This meal is a reminder to us of the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. He took bread and said this is my body broken for you, take eat and do this in remembrance of me. After dinner, he took a cup and said this is blood, the blood of a new covenant, take and drink, do this in remembrance of me.

This meal reminds us that God is a giver. Giver of freedom from slavery. Giver of manna in the desert. Giver of new life in the Promised Land. Giver of Jesus, even to the point of death, so that we could have life. May this meal be for us spiritual food that empowers us to be generous as well.

[**communion slide**] You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to come to the table today. If you are someone who wants to be generous, who wants to throw off the chains of consumerism and embrace generosity, then you are welcome to come. I'm going to pray and after I'm done feel free to come forward when you're ready.

BLESSING

May we be a people who, recognizing that God is a giver, are known by our generosity. Go in the peace of the Father Son and Holy Spirit.