

“ADVENT CONSPIRACY (#1): SPEND LESS”

(2 Corinthians 8:9-15)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 11-28-10]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: 2 Corinthians 8:9-15 and Pray.

2. [WATCH VIDEO “*Black Friday*” (Time 2:32, from SermonSpice.com)]

A–I won’t even ask how many of you did that this past Friday, but it’s something that’s grown to be sort of a tradition for some people: standing in long lines for hours on end, waiting for the after-Thanksgiving sales to start.

B–And even if you don’t do *that*, I guarantee that *many* of you at least got up early on Friday morning to be at the stores/malls in time for the “earlybird” specials, didn’t you?

C–Well, you’re not alone! And while the day after Thanksgiving is the busiest single day for consumer spending in the entire year, it’s just the tip of the iceberg.

3. Americans spend over \$450 *billion* on Christmas goods and products every single year – that’s nearly \$1000 *per person*.

A–We buy things for ourselves, for our spouses, our kids, parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, co-workers, neighbors, people who gave *us* something last year but who *weren’t* on *our* list, for our dogs, and our dog’s best friend’s Master... the list is endless!

1–We end up returning a lot of it because it doesn’t fit, or we don’t like the color, or we’d just rather have the money.

2–And we tend to pay for most of it with credit cards that we’re still trying to pay off *next Christmas*.

B–And all of this leaves us dizzy, tired, stressed out, and just wishing for it to all be over!

4. But here’s a thought: there are nearly 250 million Christians in America – 250 million people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ.

A–What would happen if all 250 million of us (or even just a good portion) agreed together not to let the holidays be reduced to retail circus that depletes our pocketbooks and consumes our souls?

B–What if *we conspired* together for these weeks to be *different* (at least for *US*)?

C–Well, that’s the purpose of the series we’re beginning today called “Advent Conspiracy” in which we’re re-imagining what the holiday season could look when we substitute consumerism and consumption with four simple (but powerful) counter-cultural, Christ-centered concepts: *Spend Less*; *Give More*; *Love All*; and *Worship Fully*.¹

D–Over the next five weeks (including Christmas Eve), we’ll be unpacking these and suggesting a few ways to live them out in our holiday practices.

–II–

5. Let’s start with the admonition to “**SPEND LESS.**”

A–You know, living as we do in a culture which in many ways is *built around* consumerism, this is a very radical concept to propose... and an even harder one to put into practice!

1–For example, some will say that since retail spending keeps our economy strong, this kind of advice is “unAmerican” because it’ll just continue our economic crisis.

2–But let’s be clear: I’m not talking here about spending less on *everything*, much less about giving up spending *altogether*!

B–No, the advice I’m suggesting is simply to *pay closer attention to that which we DO spend money on*, and *ONLY* buy things that’ll make a genuine impact in the life of the receiver.

1–How many of us have bought Christmas presents for no other reason than out of obligation? How many of us have received a gift out of that same obligation? And *where* do those gifts usually end up? (the trash, the garage, or the “regifting” pile)

2–You see, despite our insistence to the contrary, the holidays tend to be a season of *selfishness* and *excess* – Oh, we *talk* a lot about “compassion” and “helping the poor and needy,” but I find it strange how we still tend to spend much more on *ourselves* and our *families* than we do on the poor and needy.²

3–As one author has put it, each Christmas we Americans tend to “*buy gifts that people don’t need, with money we don’t have, to impress people we don’t like.*”³

6. Well, what if – instead of preparing for Christmas *that way* – we prepared for it by spending less on gifts of *excess*, so that we could free more of our resources for gifts that really matter?

A–Things like... helping MUST ministries provide a mother and her children a meal to eat and a roof over their head, so they don’t have to eat out of a Roswell Rd. trash can, or sleep under an I-75 underpass?

1–...What about helping the Kioni School in Meru, Kenya provide a child a quality education so they can break the cycle of poverty in their African village?

2—...Or giving to our church's Christmas Relief Fund so that a fellow church member doesn't have their light or heat bill cut off this winter?

3—...Or providing a care package through our church's young adult ministry for a college student to remind them they're being thought of during the holidays?

4—Earlier this month, many of you already helped provide some of the 96 shoeboxes from our church for needy world children through "*Operation Christmas Child*."

5—And Saturday a week ago, many of you may have done what my family and I did at our Women's Craft Bazaar... we bought items we may not have really *needed*, but we did so because those gifts benefitted charities that help others.

B—You see, "Spending Less" doesn't mean that we love our family or friends any less, and *neither* does it mean we don't spend money at all.

1—In some cases, in fact, we may actually spend as much (or more) than we have in the past!

2—But we will have been more *thoughtful* in evaluating *WHAT* we're buying, for *WHOM* and *WHY* we're buying it, and *WHO* it benefits (e.g., what company/cause; And is it a company/cause that's worthy of our support?)⁴

C— Now, my family and I certainly aren't perfect at this yet, but as an example, this year we're not only cutting back on the *quantity* of store-bought gifts for each other, but we're trying to cut out excess "filler gifts" altogether.

1—In other words, we're being more intentional about trying to make sure that the gifts we *DO* buy are ones that'll be *treasured* hopefully for years to come, and *not* buy things that likely would just end up in a garage sale next summer!

2—In the words of one author, "*The challenge is to balance our desires with the needs in our communities and the rest of the world. It means that shopping will become less about entertainment and more about necessities.*"⁵

7. Now, I know that some of you probably think all this sounds a bit like Scrooge – taking all the fun out of holiday shopping.

A—But despite how it may sound, let me remind us that what we're talking about today is *exactly* the admonition that Paul gives to the early Christians in today's scripture.

[Contemp. Service: Read MSG version of 2 Corinthians 8:9-15]

B—You see, Paul here is essentially talking about the equitable use of our money and possessions – what he refers to in Verse 14 as (MSG) "*your surplus matching [the] deficit [of others, so that]... in the end you come out even*"; (NRSV) "*a question of fair balance between your present abundance and [the] need [of others].*"

C–It’s true that he’s not specifically talking about Christmas shopping here, but his words certainly apply to it.

1–He’s saying that part of our responsibility as followers of Christ is to *consider the needs of others* as we use (and in this case... spend) our wealth.

2–It means, for one, that we should strive to purchase gifts not based on what *we* might want to give or be valuable to *us*, but instead based more on what others truly *need*, and what would bring value and meaning to *their* lives. ⁶

3–It means on the on hand...YES: be willing to literally “Spend Less” on *excess* gifts so that we have more money available to support causes which help others. ⁷

4–But on the other hand... it can also mean *spending money* on things that we might not have considered in the past, but that we choose to purchase because we know the profits will help make a *real* difference in the lives of others. ⁸

–III–

8. You see, one author put it this way, “*It’s not enough to say NO to the way Christmas is celebrated by many. We need to [instead] say YES to a different way of celebrating.*” ⁹

A–Paul’s words in today’s scripture challenge us to do just this.

B–They invite us to become part of an “Advent Conspiracy” in which the holiday season to become scandalous once again (like it was in the beginning).

C–And when you & I “*Spend Less*” – maybe we buy one less gift from a store (just one), and redirect that money towards something more eternal that truly helps the lives of other – then the birth of Jesus again becomes the occasion for a miracle:

1–From our small sacrifices, we’ll find ourselves surprisingly more available to sense the presence of Christ during the season.

2–We’ll discover (as many already have) a new kind of abundance (*God’s* abundance) that we’ll be able to share in ways that truly change the world.

9. [PRAY: “*O God, forgive us when we’ve made the Advent and Christmas seasons more about ourselves instead of about you – when we’ve allowed the holidays to become more about consumerism and shopping than about compassion and sharing. This year (and every year forward), help us to celebrate differently than everyone else, so that others can see how our faith makes a difference in our lives – to give gifts based not merely on what we might want to give or be valuable to us, but instead based more on what others truly need, and what will bring meaning and value to their lives. Help us to remember that all gifts in the end come from you, and that as we share out of our abundance, lives and communities around the world can be transformed not only this Christmas, but every day afterward, as well. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*”]

ADVENT CONSPIRACY
“SPEND LESS” IDEAS TO CONSIDER:

- If it’s not too late, set a budget; know your limit, and stick to it!
- If it’s early enough, start saving for a debt free Christmas celebration
- Before you start buying, consider each person on your list. Think about your relationship and what significance it brings to your life. Then buy according to *that* significance
- Consider your own moral and faith values and ask whether or not the gift(s) you are purchasing reflects those values (even if it doesn’t necessarily reflect the values of the recipient)
- When possible, do some basic research regarding the companies or makers of products you want to purchase. Do they do business in a way that is consistent with your morals and values as a Christian? (For example, are they honorable in how they deal with employees and workers? Or do they exploit or treat them unfairly? If the latter, perhaps the product is not worthy of your purchase)
- Consider drawing names, giving one less gift than the year before (or perhaps two)
- As a family, pick a mission project or cause that you will plan to financially support in place of one or two gifts to each other

ENDNOTES:

1. The authors of the book on which this series is based put it this way, “*It is not enough to say no to the way Christmas is celebrated by many; we need to say yes to a different way of celebrating*” [Rick McKinley, Chris Seay and Greg Holder, Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 17]. “*As we strive to see the birth of Christ from inside stable instead of from inside the mall, our holiday practices (preparations) begin to change*” (McKinley, p. 11).

2. As one of the authors of Advent Conspiracy says it, “*Christmas in America is more about getting what we want than [about] giving what people need*” (McKinley, Advent Conspiracy, p. 54). – and it’s true!

3. Glenn Hannigan, editor of the North Georgia Advocate (an edition of the United Methodist Reporter newspaper), in the article “*What Will You Give This Christmas?*” (Volume 157, No. 29, Section A, November 19, 2010).

4. For example, there are times when “Spending Less” means we choose NOT to purchase something if we discover that it was produced in a manner that used or exploited others for profit. On the other hand, there may be other times in which “Spending Less” means we choose TO purchase something we may not really need in order to help others have gainful employment, or help them feed their children, or get basic medical help, all from the profits of our purchase(s).

Some might ask, “*How much is ‘Too much’?*” There’s not really an easy answer to that question. The key, I believe, lies simply in our willingness to ask the question *in the first place*, and then to be willing to engage and live in the emerging tensions. It will require us to better plan and research the products and producers of our consumer goods, and to better cultivate our relationships so we know what would be *most* beneficial, valuable to them, and needed by them.

5. McKinley, Advent Conspiracy, p.52. Asking such questions helps us eliminate spending from our budgets that brings harm to ourselves, our neighbors, and our world. The key to this kind of mind set is to consider “...[*whether or not*] *we are willing to rethink the way we use our wealth?*” (p. 60).

6. Author C.S. Lewis once said that “*The best way to break money’s power is to give it away,... but I don’t believe one can settle how much we ought to give – the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.... If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say that they are too small. There ought to be*

things we should like to do & cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them” [C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 86]. Wow! What would happen if we Christians began to really live like that, and practice that kind of generosity? Our communities would be changed. Our neighborhoods would be transformed. Our churches would minister in ways not previously possible! And when you and I “Spend Less,” all this becomes possible because we all of the sudden have resources available to *BE* generous with others that we didn’t have before because we were just spending it on Christmas “excess.”

7. “*The Bible tells us to approach life and finances with an open hand. ‘The objective is not to go under so others will have some relief; the objective is to use this opportunity today to supply their needs out of your abundance’*” (McKinley, Advent Conspiracy, p. 58).

8. Paul’s words describe the fundamental difference between the world’s economy and the economy of God’s kingdom. In the former, our mood and our contentment swings from one side of the pendulum to another based on how well the DOW Jones average does, or what the unemployment figures show. But God’s kingdom (described in the Bible) reveals a very different kind of economy: one in which happiness, contentment and fulfillment is not conditioned upon the whims of the DOW Jones Industrial Average, or what the national or local unemployment or housing figures show. Instead, it’s an economy in which we share with those in need, so that everyone always has enough, and that all of our needs will be met. Remember the Israelites wandering in the desert, learning to trust God for water from rocks and manna from heaven – it’s message being that God really *will* take care of us and take care of our needs *if* we’ll truly trust Him. Paul’s words (and our “Advent Conspiracy” series) invite us to discover the economy of God – to learn that all that we’ve been given has been given to us *so that* we can share it with others. Christmas, therefore, is the perfect time to celebrate and challenge us (and others) to live in and practice *that* economy – the economy of God in which we are called to give out of our abundance, and to trust that God will provide our needs for each and every day.

9. McKinley, Advent Conspiracy, p. 17. “*As we strive to see the birth of Christ from inside stable instead of from inside the mall, our holiday practices (preparations) begin to change*” (McKinley, Advent Conspiracy, p. 11).