

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Possessions or obsessions

Presented by Bob Smith

1.

There is a recent book that has been creating quite a stir in America. It is entitled *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess*. The author is Robert Franks and he claims that what we sometimes call 'retail therapy' doesn't work. Two decades of rapidly increasing affluence and the 'shop till you drop' mentality has not made people any happier. Whereas in the past lavish spending was associated only with the very rich, over the past twenty years it has become a way of life for of us. Things that we once considered luxuries now are expectations and we feel deprived and dissatisfied if we don't have them.

Our culture is obsessed by possessions. We have convinced ourselves that the good life comes through accumulation. But experience teaches us that it doesn't. It actually becomes like a drug; the more we get the less it satisfies us and the more we want.

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2.

Nicci Gerrard, writing in the *Good Weekend*, said, "People are never happy when they are dwelling on themselves. In all the research into happiness, what emerges is that when people say they are happy, they are almost always busy, and caught up in activity...In other words, happiness comes when you lose yourself. In those moments of euphoric forgetfulness, when we are no longer dwelling upon ourselves, we find what we cannot ever grasp when we are consciously trying to do so." But in a world where possessions and preoccupation with our own happiness often become obsessions, it is difficult to know where to draw the line between the legitimate enjoyment of material things and neurotic materialism. How do we go about living authentic Christian lives in a world that has made a god of the economy?

Jesus warned that this attitude is the great enemy of our souls. He referred to it as the worship of Mammon. Mammon originally was a Middle Eastern idol god: but by Jesus' time it had become associated with wealth and luxurious excess. Jesus stated quite categorically, "You cannot serve God and Mammon." In other words he identified our compulsive pursuit of materialism as idolatry; something that is in opposition to faith in God. He also understood how easy it is for money to become more than a mere commodity for us. He knew that it has a subtle power to take God's place in our lives.

This happens when we allow it to become our basic source of security. If we have it we feel safe. If we don't have it we feel afraid. It also happens when we begin to see money and the things it can buy as the way we find meaning in life. In both these areas it replaces God who is the only source of security and meaning. But Jesus also understood our dilemma very well. In his Sermon on the Mount he gave some very practical and deeply spiritual advice. "Don't worry and ask yourselves, 'Will we have anything to eat? Will we have anything to drink? Will we have any clothes to wear?'" He said. "Only people who don't know God are always worrying about such things. Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these. But more than

anything else, put God’s work first and do what he wants. Then the other things will be yours as well.” I think that Jesus was saying that what we have to do in order to live truly contented lives is to re-focus all that nervous energy and thought away from our obsessions and onto doing God’s will. It was like he was saying, if you are going to worry about anything, worry about doing God’s will, and He will look after the rest.

Many people think that the Bible says that “Money is the root of all evil.” Well it doesn’t. The Bible actually says, “The love of money is the root of all evil.” Money itself is just a commodity; something to be used. Money and the things it can buy are, in themselves, neither good nor bad. But our attitude to them is never neutral. It is in our attitude that we show whether these things are possessions to enhance our lives, or obsessions that harm our souls – God substitutes – that we think will make us feel secure and give life a sense of meaning.

That’s why the Bible says, “Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches but on God who richly supplies all things to enjoy.” The fact is, of course, that there is no final security in any type of financial asset. Jesus said, “Don’t store up treasures on earth! Moths and rust can destroy them, and thieves can break in and steal them.” He was referring to the sorts of things that constituted wealth in his day – precious metals and costly garments, kept in houses that could never be made completely secure.

Well life and wealth are far more complicated today, encompassing a diverse range of assets and investments, most of which we insure against loss or theft. Yet even today no investment is completely secure. Recent years have seen many people lose their life savings through investment scams, the collapse of a financial investment or a downturn in the stock market. War, galloping inflation, international recessions have caused millions to lose their wealth during the past few decades. Even something as common as a marriage breakdown can seriously threaten someone’s hard-earned financial security. And, even if we survive all these, the old saying is still as true as ever, that we can’t take it with us when we go.

So Jesus calls us to get our thinking straight. He tells us to look at the birds and the flowers and see how God provides for them during their appointed life span without them having to be consumed by worry or obsessed by storing things away. And then he reminds us that we are infinitely more valuable to God than birds and flowers, so won’t God also provide what we need during our allotted life span too? “Isn’t life more than food and the body than clothing?” he says; meaning that if God has provided us with life, won’t he also provide us with the means for sustaining it and fulfilling its purpose.

The point here is that Jesus calls us not just to a theoretical trust in God, but to a very practical one that touches the one thing in life that tends to worry us the most – money.

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3.

Breaking free from a lifetime habit of worrying about money, or believing that money can buy us meaning in life, isn’t easy. Our world is driven by concerns about the economy and we are all subtly conditioned to think that it is the thing that ultimately guarantees our sense of security and meaning. The advertising industry feeds our dissatisfaction; persuading us that more is better and life is in possessing. The result, for most of us, is one of two things: miserliness, in which we try to make ourselves feel secure by hoarding money; or materialism in which we try to quench our dissatisfaction by spending it. So what does Jesus say about this? He teaches us to take direct action.

“But more than anything else,” he says, “Put God’s work first and do what he wants. Then the other things will be yours as well.” Learn the truth that our ultimate fulfilment and contentment doesn’t come from the accumulation of things, but from a life filled with purpose – a life lived in the centre of God’s will. Do this, he says, and you can rest secure in the knowledge that God who calls us to find our fulfilment in doing his will, also provides for all those things that we need to do it. However, even though most of us know the logic of this and have a lifetime of experiencing it, we still need the occasional reminder to keep us from slipping back.

I certainly do because I seem to have a natural capacity to worry about money. I remember once taking a day off for quiet reflection. I was sitting in my car overlooking Moreton Bay and thinking about a Psalm I had been reading, which in my Bible was titled ‘God’s Provision.’ It struck me as very appropriate psalm that morning because I was suffering one of my occasional bouts of money worries. I closed my eyes and let my thoughts run, and as I did I happened to recall Jesus’ words about ‘looking at the birds of the air’ and how God provides for them. At that moment I opened my eyes and noticed a sea eagle flying right into my line of vision, less than twenty metres away, then turning around and flying back out of my line of sight in the direction it had come from. In its talons it was holding a large fish.

Now I didn’t hear any voices speaking from Heaven, but the fact that that took place right before my eyes at the very moment my mind had been on those very words of Jesus made me feel that was a message for me. A message to live trustingly, trusting God who provides for birds and flowers to also provide me with all that I need to live the life He wants for me; just as He always has.

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4. Conclusion

Jesus taught us that our “lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions.” Life continually teaches us the same thing. Unfortunately many of us never learn it. The wisest people have always known that happiness is not found by deliberately seeking it.

Rather, it is a by-product of a life that is filled with meaning. And the greatest meaning for life is to know that we are in the centre of God’s will for us, loving Him and loving people, even as we love ourselves; and doing so with the quiet confidence that knows that He will provide us with everything that we need to do it.

And as for the money and the possessions that we pick up along the way, they will no longer be obsessions that enslave us, but blessings, received from the good hand of God, in whom we find contentment.

Lord, help us to refocus our lives and energies on doing your will, and in this to find our security and fulfilment. Amen.