



# A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

## Lesson 6 – Learning from Our Traditions

Dear friends:

Over the last five weeks we have talked about very basic and general questions, like what faith has to do with conduct and how we ought to think about moral life. We have used a number of sources to shed light on our questions, coming from a variety of times and places and situations. These giant figures of Christian history have offered us a great deal. They have given us insights into the sources of human action, and examples of how faithful living is rooted in and nourished by the story Christians tell and the practices they engage in. However, even the most recent of these figures lived and wrote more than 200 years ago, in a context so dramatically different from our own as to seem almost another world. However moving and powerful we may find their teaching, the question remains, how can they help us to think and to act as Christians in our own time and place?

To test the fruitfulness of these resources for our own reflection and guidance, we turn now to a problem in many ways central to our historical location at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the problem of consumerism. It must be acknowledged that the issues are complex. In our world, the spread of capitalism on which consumer economies are built is both heralded and lamented. Some see in it the promise of greater well-being and freedom for millions of people. Others see the concentration of economic power and the loss of distinctive cultures and communities. Probably the reality will have aspects of both, and the future is impossible to predict.

But for those of us who live in the developed consumer economies of the West, the moral problems are much more concrete and immediate. We are surrounded every day by products for sale, and bombarded by messages that tell us that the right purchases will make us beautiful, will make us safe, will make us envied or loved or free. Happiness is on sale today and every day at your local shopping mall, and a great deal of our time, energy and attention are devoted to making the money that will enable us to buy the things we need and want, and to choosing and carting home the ones we have decided upon. Further resources go to storing, cleaning, repairing and maintaining them once they are bought, and of course to replacing them with new things as they are used up or worn out, or (more often) as they are made obsolete by new and better products.

So absorbed are we in this routine of earning and spending, buying and replacing, that we often fail to see any of this as a moral issue at all. But in fact, throughout all of Christian history, and in the religious and moral traditions out of which it grew, our forebears have insisted that what we do with our material resources, how we use the powers they give us, and how we respond to those who lack them, are inescapably moral choices. Our actions in this realm have a profound impact on us, on our neighbors, and on the planet we share. They help to shape our hopes and fears, and the things in which we place our trust. For all these reasons, they are matters of moral and spiritual importance, and God cares what we do about them.

What help can our sources—Paul (on behalf of Scripture more generally) and Augustine, Martin Luther and John Wesley—be to us as we think together about how to live? How can they support us in making faithful choices in the midst of unprecedented material abundance, and unprecedented pressures to have, to buy, to consume more and more of that abundance to satisfy our desires?

A final note: even in this specific and practical arena of how we use our purchasing power, no concrete rules will be offered here. This is not because nothing specific and useful can ever be said. It is because the decisions we make about money and its use are made in particular contexts. We live our lives in particular circumstances, and in particular communities where our choices fit into a larger pattern. Money is a medium of social exchange, a medium of relationship, and specific choices about it have to be made and lived out in communities. If this last session serves to launch some conversations in your class, your congregation, or your community about the powers and dangers of consuming, it will have done the most important thing.

Sincerely,

*Sondra*