

Advent Conspiracy: Spend Less
Delivered December 9, 2012

When it comes to the giving of gifts at Christmas, I tend to be a bit of a pragmatist. I think I inherited this from my dad who famously once drew his own name in the family exchange drawing and decided this was his opportunity to really get what he wanted for himself. I'm not a fan of a large amount of really small gifts that will be forgotten by New Year's day, preferring to spend a little bit more on a gift that might be a bit more expensive, but would be more useful in the long run.

At the same time, particularly when it comes to giving gifts to the kids, I also want to make sure that everything is fair. For some reason I imagine the kids are going to go around googling how much each of their gifts cost to figure out who got the best haul. So when I recognize that we may have spent more on one kid than another, I usually feel like I need to even it out. Of course you know what that means – I almost think the way to even it out is by bringing back something I bought, but is almost always by spending just a little bit more on the one who's been shortchanged.

The problem with this, of course, is that it has very little to do with the person I'm buying gifts for and actually has much more to do with my own needs for Christmas. It's much more about what would be good for me, because if I'm honest I would have to admit that I want to be seen as fair, and I want my kids to know that I love them, even if I'm measuring my love for them with something as irrational as the amount of dollars I've spent at the store at Christmas. Part of it is the unhealthy comparison I will make with their friends parents, and even though in a completely rational

world I would never judge my love for my kids by the dollar signs, somehow at Christmas I decide that's the best measure of my love for them. And despite knowing what we said last week, that the central focus of this season is on worship, I still get lost in the dominant cultural equation that says: Spend More = Enjoy More.

We all know very well that if there is one competing altar for our worship time this season it is the retail altar. Our culture has a massive spending problem, and it seems the spending problem reaches its absolute peak over the next couple of weeks. We know that little Johnny will never want to wear the outfit we're buying, but we feel like we have to do it just to even out the score between the other kids. We know that the little piece of plastic that we are going to stuff in the stocking will be broken before the day is over, but we rationalize it and say it's just a couple dollars so we'll buy it anyway. And while we tell ourselves that it's about the person we're buying a gift for, I wonder how many times it's really about ourselves and satisfying some internal compulsion to be thought well of.

And it's not just an internal pressure we face, because we know that the external tension is there as well. Everything we see right now feeds into the sense that the spend more = enjoy more equation is somehow true. The ads on TV will tell you how easy they can make it for you to spend more than we did last year, and we'll go into debt to make sure that the pile of gifts we give at Christmas this year will somehow determine the quality of our Christmas. As our spending grows our discipline fails, and even though we said in October that this year we were going to spend less, somehow we can't help going along for the ride again. We

attempt to manage all of this internal tension and external pressure and then we wonder why we can't seem to enjoy Christmas like we used to.

So since we're being a little sneaky with Christmas this year and talking in conspiratorial tones, I thought we would once again avoid using a Christmas-y passage to teach from this morning. Instead of going to the Scriptures to hear the old, familiar stories, I thought we would go to them to allow God to gently challenge us, and maybe bring a much needed word of correction into our hearts and our out of control spending habits, because if anything can expose our hearts this season it's this word we're about to read.

Let's read together just a few verses in **James 4:1-4**. Talk about a non-Christmasy passage, right? We want the warm fuzzies, and James just sandblasts us with some razor sharp words. I would say it is not really a Christmas passage, except what I read in verse 1 sounds an awful lot like what I imagine is happening in a lot of households right about now. We are in the season of joy and peace, but I'd be willing to bet that at least once or twice in a couple of households represented here there have been some words exchanged that would qualify as fighting and quarrelling. I'm guessing that, from minor to major issues, Christmas has surfaced an awful lot of tensions in homes. They're certainly not reserved to this season, but it seems to be particularly true right now. And our first instinct with all that fighting and arguing will be to blame the other person in the quarrel, because it couldn't possibly be our fault that we're arguing.

But James presents a different perspective. Those fights and arguments, those tensions and bickering are all a result

of what's going on inside of our own hearts. We don't like to think about it that way, but maybe it's worth a shot. We have rampant, often greedy passions in our hearts that are at war within us and those passions within us cause a great deal of tension and stress around us. We imagine that it's about the season of giving, but so much of our stress revolves around the need to satisfy our desires – the desire to be seen as the good parent, the good spouse, the person who makes up for our other failures in the dollars we spend. And if we're really honest, we give at least in part because we know that we will receive in return. So our passions get stirred up and we can't help getting lost in them, and when someone (maybe a spouse or a friend) points out what we're doing, we get just a little defensive about it. And maybe we get defensive because we suspect, underneath it all, that they may be right.

Those unchecked passions get us so worked up inside that we are willing to do whatever it takes to meet those desires, even considering things that we would otherwise never consider. Most experts agree that Christmas in America is a 500+ billion dollar industry. Just let that settle in. And while we will spend nearly \$500 billion this year, we will probably do very little to consider the people around the world in extreme poverty who may not even have clean water to drink at Christmas. So when James says we will even murder to get our desires fulfilled, we think it's just rhetoric, but I wonder if he's onto us more than we admit. I'm not going to guilt trip us this morning, but since so much of James' letter focuses on the weak and the poor and our concern for them, I think it's probably not a bad application of what he's teaching.

So he puts his finger on their covetousness, their greed, and the insatiable appetites for more. He tells them what we know to be true about us as well, that a little bit is never enough, and more is always better. We get a little taste of those passions being met and we keep coming back for more, and while we think that's an American thing, I think James would tell you that it has a much longer history than that. And when we don't get what we want from our holiday experience, our lives turn ugly and we start taking out our unmet expectations and desires on someone else – usually the people closest to us. It is a terrifying, but accurate, picture of the human condition, but as followers of Jesus it's what we are being called away from.

He points to a major problem for us – we do not have because we do not ask. In other words, we do not recognize the abundant generosity and abundant love of our God who gives to us more freely than we could possibly imagine and satisfies every one of our heart's desires. But our problem is that the desires of our heart are still inherently selfish, and not really at all concerned with what matters to God. As soon as we hear that we don't have because we don't ask, we think that means we should just ask for the things that we want.

And so he pushes even further. We don't have because we don't ask, but when we do finally get around to asking, we ask for the wrong things. We don't allow God to reframe our passions and desires to be like his, and we don't submit to his work of shaping our lives to reflect his, and so when we ask for stuff we ask for what will satisfy the selfish desires of our hearts; what would allow us to spend on ourselves. He literally says that when we ask like that, we are asking out of

“sickness”, because we want God to be generous to us so that we can be selfish and spend on our desires. The problem is not God’s generosity, or even our spending per se, the problem is the parts of our heart that are still rebellious against God’s kingdom and authority in our lives that resist his will. We are passionate about the wrong things, which means we spend more on the wrong things and less on the right things.

This marks us as friends with the world, and enemies of God, so he calls us to resist that pull into conforming to the world’s pattern. Followers of Jesus should be cutting a very different path through the world when it comes to the fulfilling of our passions. In this moment I would say he’s asking us to resist the urge to spend just for the sake of spending, and take the time to examine whether our passions are really aligned with God’s or not. There are places in our hearts that are actually opposing God’s intentions for us, and if we follow them we will be led astray. So while we would rather not hear it, today the call is for us to die to those selfish, spendy habits and allow Jesus to reshape those desires into something that would more reflect his character and nature.

I’m urging you not to make the mistake of putting a dollar amount on your generosity this season. You cannot measure the things God desires for you or even for the people you’re giving to based on a dollar amount anyway, and it’s possible that the money you **don’t** spend on the gifts you **don’t** give may be more meaningful than the money you do spend. So here’s your weekly challenge, and I’m warning you, it’s going to be a **very** difficult one. This week, just for one week, I want you to refuse to spend a single dollar on Christmas gifts. Just say no. Don’t do it. Put away the

wallet, the cards and the cash. Instead, take a week to allow God to refocus your desires. Spend the time reflecting on what God would want to do in your life and the lives of those people you are giving gifts to, and you may find a totally different purpose for your spending this season.

I want us to entertain a hard-to-imagine equation: Spend Less = Enjoy More. Let's see if we can write that new equation this week, and maybe next week we'll get a glimpse of how that would work.