



By Marti Zimmerman

**S**oon Christmas inventory will fill store shelves. Long before Halloween or Election Day, holiday shopping will call out to our members reminding them its time to buy. Stores offer every incentive to get people through the doors, since nearly one-fourth of all sales and most retail profits are made during the holidays. Even politicians urge consumer spending, for the sake of the economy.

Our members will shop, in spite of the fact that many are still paying off last Christmas' credit card debt. They will

shop, notwithstanding that few have saved the suggested three to six months wages for family crisis, or planned ahead for college tuition or retirement. Shopping is part of American life, whether it's once a day to the coffee shop or a trip to the mall, buying the occasional car or even a new home. Yet shopping gets many of our members deep into debt. Americans on average now spend 1% more than we make.

In Matthew 6:21, Jesus reminds his followers, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We live and preach surrounded by a culture that honors—even worships—consumerism, bowing to the promise of the good life. Our sense of self-worth too often is defined not by our identity as beloved children of God, but by what we own, and especially around the holidays, we think we can express our love through what we buy. Preachers have been silent

## ASK YOURSELF WITH EACH PURCHASE

1. DO I NEED THIS ITEM?
2. CAN I AFFORD IT?
3. UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS WAS THE PRODUCT MADE?
4. WHERE WILL THE PRODUCT END UP?
5. IS THERE A SIGNIFICANT GIFT FOR THE BIRTHDAY BOY, JESUS?

too long on the issues of consumer culture's grip, its resulting debt, its idolatry, and its misuse of the creation's resources. Each fall, as part of my pastoral ministry, just before the holiday shopping season and the resulting January bills, I encourage my members to "shop for the glory of God," passing out small cards printed with five questions they can keep in their wallets while shopping.

First I ask, "Do you need this item?" Shopping starts with needs—shelter, food, transportation, clothing, health care. If advertising has its way, wants become needs. Homes have doubled size in a generation, closets now require organization to provide space for all the clothes we purchase, car air conditioners and microwaves have become necessities in the last decade. If our neighbor has it, we think we need it too. Scripture calls this coveting, and of the Ten Commandments, it is the only one repeated twice to get our attention. When it comes to gift giving, ask yourself, "Does my loved one need this? Will it make a long-term difference in their well being?"

Secondly I ask, "Can you afford it?" Christmas gift giving comes every year. Jesus suggested in Luke 14: 27 that we first sit down and estimate the cost to see if we have enough to complete the task. Holiday gifts—just like food, clothing, gasoline, and giving—need to be part of a budgeted spending plan, considered only after necessities are taken care of. I remind the congregation that if you have to buy the gift on credit, with no plan to pay it off in full come January, you can't afford the gift.

The next two questions respond to Jesus' call to love your neighbor as yourself: "Under what conditions was this item produced?" We live in a global

economy. Are the people who made it paid enough to support their families? Is the gift produced in a safe manner? Secondly, "Where will the product end up?" When you or your loved one is done with it, will it go to a land-fill, become toxic waste, be re-sold or given away, or just become clutter? Will the earth suffer from our desire to give?

Finally, "Is there something special for the birthday boy under the tree?" Is there a significant gift for Jesus, who calls us to account for how we live our financial lives? Does my holiday spending include a love gift for the Holy Child, one that will please him in how it cares for the least, lost, and lonely?

Preachers have the opportunity to help the congregation make faith-filled shopping choices at Christmas, offering what Walter Brueggemann calls a counter-script to the consumer culture in which we live. Just as Daniel modeled a faithful witness in a culture that worshiped other gods, and Lydia sold her purple cloth to support ministry, we who have much and desire even more during the holidays are called to live out of our abundance and share it with others. Preachers can honor the birth of our Savior by helping the congregation shop for the glory of God. □



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