

“Spend Less”

The Advent Conspiracy, part 2

[62] SOUL SHIFT PROMO

Beginning in February 2022, our church will embark on an 8-week emphasis called “Soul Shift” with an intentional focus on life-transformation through small groups. Through a generous conference grant, every person at Grace UMC will be given a book to read and we will create small groups for everyone, all ages. We are currently recruiting leaders for in-person and virtual small groups. Please see Karen Kelley if you are interested in leading a group. Leaders will be trained at a one-day session in January. All leaders will have a guide that accompanies the book and DVD. Even if you’ve never led a group, you can do this.

1st John 2:15-17, 1st Timothy 6:6-10

[68] (Movie clip – Advent Conspiracy – Spend Less)

[69] It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas. We’ve got decorations; we’ve got snow. As you prepare to celebrate Christ’s birth, my hope is that you are not only preparing your home, but you are preparing your heart as well.

I invite you to pray with me this morning, holding your hands out with palms open, showing God that you are ready to receive whatever He has for you this morning. Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for this blessed time to celebrate your birth. You entered our world so that we could have life in you. Show us this morning, by your Word and your Spirit, how we can share this incredible news with others. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable and pleasing to you, O Son of God. Amen.

[70] How is your holiday spirit been so far? Last week, we introduced the idea of the Advent Conspiracy to help us reclaim the true meaning of the season and make this holiday less about us and more about Jesus. We discussed ideas to do with our families and recognized things that we could give up so that we could reduce our stress and worship Jesus more fully this year.

[71] Today I want to talk with you about gifts. The way we think about our giving during the holidays really gets at the core of our problem of losing the

meaning of Christmas and becoming stressed out. I remember my favorite Christmas gift. It was so big, it was both my Christmas and birthday present. (I was born on the 22nd.) [72] Here’s a picture of it. It was a huge Lego set, a futuristic Monorail Train, and it came in a box about THIS BIG (2 feet across). The instruction booklet was 30 full-sized pages. It was one of those gifts, when I saw the box under the Christmas tree with my name on it, I knew exactly what it was before I even opened it. It was amazing, and it took me hours to assemble it. I still have the set.

Something happened later on, though, that diminished the thrill I had of getting this set. I went to Toys-R-Us with my family a few months later, and I saw the same set on the shelf. It was the biggest toy in the whole section. When my mom wasn’t looking, I read the price tag for myself. It was over \$150 dollars. In 1987, that was a lot of money. I say today, it still is! And I realized that not only my parents, but my aunts and uncles had gone in together to buy this gift for me. And I felt a little guilty that they had spent so much on me. My stomach got a little queasy.

[73] Have you had that feeling before? It’s called “sticker shock.” Do we realize what we are spending to promote someone’s instant gratification? You might never guess what American’s spent on Christmas retail in 2019. One trillion dollars, with a “T”.¹ Most of that money goes to corporations who do little to nothing to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.

That number should make all of our stomachs churn. We have taken a high holy day and turned it into an occasion for idolatry and gluttony. Most of the other people in this world look at our extravagance and ask, “When is enough it enough?”

Are you uncomfortable yet? That’s a good thing. It’s also a good thing that we have God’s Word, the Bible, to give us direction and a better perspective. These two scriptures we read this morning, from 1st John and 1st Timothy, are not easy scriptures. But they make a very important point. You cannot love the world and expect to also love God. We especially need to consider this at Christmas.

[74] When we say, “love the world,” we mean loving the things of this world. We are not supposed to love things. We are supposed to love people.

¹ <https://fortunly.com/statistics/christmas-spending-statistics/#gref>

There is a huge difference. In 1st John 2, we learn that the things which draw us away from our relationship with God are pride, lust of the eyes, and our desires. We live in a society that tells us, if we just buy the right product, we will be happy. It doesn't matter if it's deodorant, cars, beers, or even houses. The commercials tell us, we are only one purchase away from contentment.

But that is simply not true. I know this. My garage is full of stuff. So are my closets. But when I open them, I don't feel content, I feel guilty. “Enough” is never enough. Possessions don't provide meaning. Love can't be bought. Would any of us want to have a house full of presents and empty of people? Hopefully not! God gives relationally, and that's how God wants us to spend Christmas, to spend all of our lives, in relationships with him and with each other.

[75] Paul writes in 1st Timothy 6, that “godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.” Stuff is not inherently good or bad. It is the emphasis that we place on stuff that trips us up and causes us to sin. The Advent Conspiracy doesn't tell you not to give gifts. Gifts are good! But we ask you, how can you spend less time, less money, and less anxiety chasing things that won't make you content this Christmas?

[76] Joseph Addison said, “A contented mind is the greatest blessing a man can enjoy in this world.” I want to be content. You should know, as your pastor, I have taken this Advent Conspiracy to heart. My family and I want to keep Jesus at the center of Christmas. We choose every year to give a “birthday present to Jesus,” through different organizations like Heifer International, Living Water International, Compassion International, and Salvation Army. It's different every year, because we want it to be thoughtful and intentional. [77] (By the way, this year we've chosen Compassion International's Youth Development Fund, www.compassion.com/youth-development.)

I am not saying this to lay a guilt trip on anyone. I just want you to know that as your pastor, I am putting my “money where my mouth is.” Better yet, I'm trying to put my money and my treasure where my heart is. I believe this is a lasting change that will impact my family, my children, even my grandchildren eventually, because we will teach each other about generosity and God's heart.

[78] Have you thought about what you could do if you spent less on Christmas? Spent less on things and more on relationships? What if your family gift was to sit down and watch “The Nativity” on DVD and talk about your faith afterwards? What if you watched “Miracle on 34th Street” and then asked the simple question, “Does God do miracles in our lives?” and see where the conversation goes? Could your family take the time, energy, and money you spend at the mall, online, or wherever, and convert it into something deeper, something memorable, something more fulfilling than plastic trinkets and credit card debt?

This is a conspiracy. It’s radical. So was the first Christmas. Jesus wasn’t born in a palace. He was born in a manger; in a barn, basically. They didn’t send CNN or the Presidential Welcoming Committee to his home, just a bunch of outcasts shepherds to see the newborn King of Kings. Jesus only got three gifts for his birthday (and if you read closely, you see those gifts didn’t come until after his second birthday!) Jesus’ birth was simple, humble, perfect, because God was making himself available to all, not just those who could afford it.

[79] When Joseph and Mary presented Jesus in the temple for the very first time, they had to make an offering for him. According to the Israelite law, the first-born son was the Lord’s and had to be redeemed. (Luke 2:21-24). Mary and Joseph were poor and could only afford two turtle doves. Can you imagine that? The Son of God, the Author of Creation, the Redeemer of the World, was purchased from God for two small birds. His parents couldn’t even afford a lamb.

Christmas doesn’t have to be complicated. It doesn’t have to be extravagant. It can be simple. We can spend less on ourselves and free up our resources, our time, to give gifts that really matter in eternity.

[80] That’s the beautiful thing about communion. We take simple elements, bread and juice, and in the hands of God, they become more valuable, more beautiful, more precious, than anything that we could ever buy. Bread and grape juice are found in nearly every part of the world. They could be eaten in Germany, Mexico, China, Russia, India, anywhere. In the same way, Jesus was given as a gift to the whole world. Not just for us here in Houghton. Not just for us in America. Not for us to use as an excuse to spend recklessly. Jesus gave his

life, freely, without a price tag on it, so that we could have eternal life. Let's spend less on ourselves, so that we can give more to Jesus.

(Prayer of confession, forgiveness and pardon, Great Thanksgiving.)

Memory verse

Matthew 6:21 - "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Reflection questions

1. How much would you estimate you spend on Christmas?
2. What was the most meaningful act of kindness you've seen during Christmas?
3. What is your most prized possession? What would it mean to you if you gave it away?
4. How would your life be different if you spent less on Christmas? What resources (money and time) would be available to you? What could you do with them?

More information and ideas are available at www.adventconspiracy.org