Living Behind the Plastic Curtain: Living Faithfully in a Consumerist Society

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Living Faithfully in a Consumerist Society

Ken Badley

Compared to the rest of the world, the average Canadian is incredibly wealthy. Some Christians in poorer countries worry that our faith is at risk of fatal compromise. What can we do to hold fast under an avalanche of material things?

Imagine this 1962 scene. A Christian family in Regina takes a few minutes after each evening meal to read the Bible and pray together. The father of that family – my father – regularly asks God to protect and sustain Christians behind the Iron Curtain and the Bamboo Curtain.

Eventually those two Cold War phrases come to have meaning for me as I hear stories at home and at church about Christians overseas facing persecution and death because they dare to follow Christ in societies whose faces are turned the other way.

Now jump to the winter of 2006, to Edmonton, where my wife and I join a small group of church friends to try living more simply. Our group reads Mary Jo Leddy’s Radical Gratitude (Orbis, 2002) and we discuss how more gratitude might lead us to view our material possessions differently. Leddy, a Roman Catholic teacher and refugee advocate in Toronto, says many wise things in her book, but the image that will not let go of me is this: in our society we live behind a plastic curtain.

For Leddy, the phrase “plastic curtain” suggests the poor quality and lack of meaning in most material goods as well as a popular slang word for credit cards.

For many of us, “plastic curtain” may also bring back echoes of past family prayers for Christians in the Communist world. Given that echo, does the phrase imply that our struggle with wealth and consumerism might be anywhere near the challenges faced by persecuted Christians?

I’ve had a year to let Leddy’s phrase sink in – a year in which I moved from one city to another and from a comfortably large house to a basement suite. The phrase kept coming back to me as I had to face my material goods – my stuff – in a whole new way.

Of course, it’s unfair to compare lethal religious persecution to our struggles with stuff.

That said, the initial shock of considering the two side by side remains a helpful reminder to prevent us from taking our wealth for granted, and the risks to faith that come with it.
“Persecution arises from righteousness and can cost believers their lives. Consumerism arises from unrighteousness and can cost believers their souls” is how Glenn Penner of Voice of the Martyrs (Canada) put it recently.

So how do we realize in our own lives the biblical understanding of how wealth and happiness connect? What strategies do we have available to wean ourselves from loving stuff so much that we miss God’s best for us?

These issues trouble all of us at times, especially downsizing empty-nesters or seniors, families contemplating a move, adult children dividing up an estate and even anyone cleaning the house or garage in spring.

So What’s the Problem?
We need not dwell on cataloguing the problem. Almost all the readers of this magazine know the gist of the Bible’s teaching on wealth, poverty and the love of possessions: our wealth may keep us out of heaven, the values of the market and the values of the manger are not the same, loving wealth leads to all kinds of evil, we should be grateful for what God has given us and be generous with it.

A dearth of knowledge of God’s norms for the economic dimension of life does not appear to be our problem. Rather, the problem seems to be that our society pressures us to live by unbiblical values, especially unbiblical economic values.

Our task as Christians in a country as wealthy as Canada is to find strategies to understand the desire for goods, to resist the materialistic pressure and advertising, and to develop structures in our own thinking and lives that remind us of the fundamental biblical stance of gratitude and the generosity that properly flows from it. We can break free from the fruitless search for happiness in buying more stuff.

And breaking free from our stuff is exactly what some of us need to do. As I rode the bus downtown last week, I counted four self-storage companies on one street between my house and downtown.

Comedian George Carlin identified the problem of our “stuff” decades ago: we have difficulty choosing what stuff to take when we travel, we buy more stuff than fits in our houses and then rent storage units to contain our extra stuff, some of us pay consultants to sort out our stuff for us and get rid of stuff we don’t need.

But we must register one caution: Study after study has shown that money does buy happiness for those living in poverty. Meeting one’s material needs is essential for basic human well-being.

But beyond poverty the research varies. Some studies find the wealthy happier. Other studies find roughly equal degrees of self-reported well-being regardless of income.
Why We Want More
If we could understand our own propensity to want we could all breathe easier, both literally
and figuratively. A helpful book in this area is Gregg Easterbrook’s The Progress Paradox
(Random House, 2003). Easterbrook, an editor at New Republic and The Atlantic, writes about
why material possessions don’t yield to deep or long-term happiness.

Facing too many choices actually reduces our happiness, he argues.

Particularly helpful – and alarming – is his point that we can always adapt to our living
conditions, including the increased number of material goods we may have added to our close
environment.

That is, no matter how glitzy the new toy, we get used to it.

How to Tackle the Pressure
Randall Rauser, who teaches at Taylor Seminary in Edmonton, says the place to start is simply
consuming less. For example, we should not simply ask how to get more miles per gallon, but
we should establish patterns in our lives that have us driving less.

He adds that we need to calculate the real costs of our small decisions and their overall impact
on the big picture. For example, take fast food. The burger or pizza may cost little relative to a
typical Canadian income, but the cumulative effects of fast food on our health are enormous,
not to mention the cost to our pocketbooks as our taxes go to pay for all the needed health
care. Plus there’s the disproportionate amount of garbage that comes with fast food. Finally,
the great demand for fast food and resulting competition encourage intensive farming practices
that bring their own environmental damage.

Often we are so used to the economic pressures around us we no long
er sense them. To
refresh your perspective, try this simple idea: without looking at them, save all the flyers from
furniture or electronics stores for one year. Then look them over. It will give you a tangible
sense of how much pressure advertising puts on us.

Such pressure inflates our wants tremendously even when we are not aware of it. One very
effective way to prick the balloon is cutting out cable television and its many advertisements.
(Many have done so and survived!) Or at least we can help children learn to watch TV critically
so the advertising has less power over them.

Other effective steps can include starting a gratitude journal. Imagine the effect if every day we
all noted a few ordinary or extraordinary things for which we are thankful.

Perhaps make a list called “The 20 Best Days of My Life” and notice how many of them relate to
new possessions – likely none. Plan more of the kinds of activities that you did list.
Or consider how we handle Christmas. We can set the tone in our families for the entire year by setting dollar limits or requiring that gifts be second-hand, found or made. We can use the resources available on various denominational and charity websites to give gifts along the lines of the goat I received from my eldest daughter last Christmas (my initial alarm was unfounded – a family in Indonesia was going to take care of it for me).

Finally, we need to be careful about comparisons. We must not compare what we have to other people’s more expensive possessions or to the advertisements in the newspaper’s auto feature or real estate section.

Lori Matties works in an inner-city school library in Winnipeg. Reflecting on her decades of activism with Habitat for Humanity and a half-dozen other agencies, she says she tries to avoid the guilt that comes with comparisons to those with less.

“My less wealthy friends have shown me that a proper Christian attitude toward possessions is not so much about comparison as it is about how I avoid the temptation to buy what I don’t need and how I try to be aware of how my purchases affect the well-being of people and creation.”

She claims that “both buying things and not buying things can become idolatrous.”

Jesus’ call to love God and neighbour, she says, may mean that some of us need to sell all we have but for others it may mean making a hospitable home to welcome others.

Living in Gratitude
We come back to where Leddy helped us start: with gratitude. We thank God for the special gifts of Saviour, Spirit, Word and Church. And we thank God for the daily gifts of food, water, work, clothing, a roof.

Out of our gratitude comes generosity. As Lori Matties reminds us, some of us simply need to discover more gratitude, generosity, service and hospitality in our daily living.

My move last year involves renting storage space. I don’t feel guilty but I have learned something important: I did not think I was materialistic but I finally realized how much stuff I actually own.

And that realization led me to ask where all the stuff came from and what it actually means – a great starting point for God to increase my awareness of what is really important in life.