

Exodus 20:17

Today's society sends a very strong message that possessions and money that enables us to be and do many things is a blessing. We are tempted to give in to this and believe it ourselves. We measure one another against what we've got or do not have.

The advertising industry fuels this assumption and this desire for more. Most adverts successfully transmit the message that we're somehow incomplete, that our lives are incomplete, if we don't have this or that or the next thing. If we only had..., we would then be truly happy.

This is very capitalist thinking. Forever increasing profits are what's important. It always baffles me that supermarkets and retail stores cry with alarm if their sales are only what they were – they have to be able to say that their sales have increased. Why? This of course means that we need to buy more while we certainly don't need more. The problem with birthdays, anniversaries or Christmas is that everyone has what they need and more. We don't need any more presents. If we need anything, we will buy it ourselves. We've got more than enough of everything material.

All this fuels in turn the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor. Those who are rich have more and more, those who are poor and can't afford the latest gadgets, cars and holidays are being made to feel less worthy as human beings simply because they don't have the latest whatever it is you need to have. Tax breaks are introduced to protect the wealth of the few while benefits are slashed and poor folk are called lazy.

Toby Morris, an Auckland based illustrator and comic artist, created a comic explaining privilege and gap between rich and poor. I will now describe it for you: 'This is Richard. His parents are doing ok. And this is Paula. Her parents? Not so much. Richard's house is warm and dry. His shelves are full of books and his fridge full of food. Paula's house is full of people and not much else. It's damp and noisy and she keeps getting sick.

Richard's parents will do anything for their baby, and so will Paula's. That's why they're working two jobs. Richard goes to a great school. Well resourced, good kids. His teachers love their job. At Paula's school, the class sizes are large, the school is underfunded, and looks it. Her teachers are tired, stretched thin from the stress.

So maybe we can see why the expectations set for Richard might be slightly different than those set for Paula.' At this point we see a cartoon of Richard getting B+ and parents suggesting hiring a tutor while Paula gets B and parents say it's not bad.

'And over the years all these little differences they start to add up. To build into something bigger.' We see Richard whose parents pay for his uni and get him an internship with a colleague of his father's while Paula needs to juggle work and studies, gets in debt and eventually quits her studies to look after her sick father.

‘And because each little difference sneaks by unnoticed’ (Richard gets his loan approved while Paula doesn’t) ‘then maybe Richard starts to believe he deserves to be on top. That he did it all himself. And maybe Paula starts to settle. Learns to “know her place”.’ The comic ends with pictures of Richard at a big party thrown for him, Paula a waitress serving him a plate of food. Richard answers a question about his secret to success by saying: ‘Less whinging, more hard work I say. I’m sick of people asking for handouts. No one ever handed me anything on plate.’¹

Money defines us whether we want it to or not. Whether we agree with it or not. Society judges us on the basis of our wealth or lack thereof. The root of that? Envy, says the tenth commandment. Envy makes us dishonour our neighbour, steal, murder, speak falsely against others.

There are two good examples of this in the Bible itself. First the story of king David who had 300 wives and 700 concubines. Leaving the moral judgment of that aside, he had plenty of female attention. But he looked out from his rooftop and spotted Bathsheba. He desired her and so he took her. A king can do that surely. When she ended up pregnant, he arranged for her husband to be killed in battle and took her for his wife number 301.

Another story comes also from the Old Testament. A royal couple, Ahab and Jezebel. They fancied getting a next door vineyard that belonged to Naboth. Naboth didn’t want to sell it to them. Jezebel arranged for two witnesses to level false accusations against Naboth who gets killed as a result. The vineyard did end up with the king and queen. Both stories started with an unchecked desire for someone or something that belonged to another.

There are more examples in today’s Church too. Faith2share produced a booklet called ‘10 Key Trends in Global Mission’ in which they share the following disturbing statistics: ‘In 1994 Rwanda was arguably the most Christian country in the world with in excess of 90% of its population belonging to one church or another and yet in a few fateful months 7.3 million people died in an horrific genocide. Most were killed by Christians.

In December 2000 a number of senior church leaders in India launched a high profile national campaign against corruption within the Church in India. Internationally crime committed within the church is estimated at £40 billion per year.

Across Europe millions of Christians who were in church on Sunday are busy on Tuesday accessing pornography, stealing from their employer, physically and mentally abusing their spouse or children in their care, and destroying the environment.²

Desire can and does claim us and own us. It keeps us bound, it keeps us slaves to it. While in fact we have everything we need. We are complete and free. We are God’s children and live by his grace alone.

¹ <http://thewireless.co.nz/articles/the-pencilsword-on-a-plate>.

² Faith2share, ‘10 Key Trends in Global Mission’, p. 3.

I'd like to turn tables for a minute now. What do you have that others might envy? Take a moment to ponder this question. What do you have that others might envy?

Does this realisation change the way you might treat them? Is there a chance that we could start being defined by what we offer to others or share with others rather than what we own? Could there be freedom and love in that? Let's take a moment of silence now after which we're going to say the prayer of confession together which has been printed in your orders of service.