

***“Spend Less”***  
***Series: Advent Conspiracy***  
***James 5:1-6, Luke 3:1-6***  
***December 6, 2009***

Every time I start to think that we already get every catalog known to man, a new one comes I’ve never heard of before. Now, we *always* get lots of catalogs at our house, but have you noticed how it ramps up this time of year? Sometimes, we get several copies of the same catalog in the same week. Anybody else? And did you ever notice that the more you leaf through these catalogs, searching for just the right gift for that impossible-to-buy-for boss or grandparent or friend, that you discover they have things you never even knew you needed, but all of a sudden can’t live without? *That’s* their plan! It’s a conspiracy. They know that we are susceptible to the power of suggestion, especially at Christmastime. They know that we have bought into the not-so-subliminal messages of Madison Avenue: “You deserve it.” “You’re worth it.” “You know you want it.” *And* you can get it on 5-easy-pay. Bigger is better, newer is better, more is better, better is better. It’s a conspiracy. A conspiracy to get us to spend more.

Last week, we began a series of messages about entering into a *different* kind of conspiracy for the season. An Advent Conspiracy. We talked about conspiring together to experience Advent and Christmas differently this year. [The discussion continues in Adult Ed, so join in.] A plan to not only *say* ‘Jesus is the reason for the season,’ but to actually *live that*. A plot to celebrate a counter-cultural Christmas this year.

Let’s watch: [“Enter the Story” video: <http://www.adventconspiracy.org/videos/>]

It all begins with worship. It seems like of all times in the year, the season of Advent ought to be the time when worship is the easiest. And yet, as we said last week, it is often the hardest in many ways. Advent is about *waiting* for God to come. Advent is about *watching expectantly* for all the ways God comes. Advent is about *worshipping* the God who comes. Or at least, that’s what it’s supposed to be about. Last week, I asked you to reflect on and answer this question: *What would it take for you to worship more fully this Advent?* I hope you’ve thought about that this week. I hope you’ve even taken some steps to actually do it. Today, I want to talk with you about the second counter-cultural concept in our Advent Conspiracy, and this one is really counter-cultural. This one you might not like so much. In fact, I think there’s a good chance that you really won’t like this one. Because I want to suggest to you today that in addition to worshipping Jesus more fully this season, we also SPEND LESS money.

Does it seem wrong somehow to talk about money in church at Christmastime? And yet, it seems to me that money is the 800 lb. gorilla in the room at Christmas. Spending less is really hard this time of year. It’s a wacky idea. Because all around us are messages to buy, buy, buy. Shop, shop, shop. Commercials for jewelry stores with talking GPS systems wearing diamond necklaces. Luxury cars in the driveway with huge red bows on them. Buy, buy, buy. Shop, shop, shop. And here’s the pastor on Sunday morning saying SPEND LESS. “Spend less than what?” you may ask. Spend less than last year? Spend less than my neighbor? Spend less than the average American, who spends almost \$1,000 on Christmas gifts? Christmas in America has really become about getting what we want or getting somebody else what they want. Hence the

catalogs. But what are we teaching our children and grandchildren about the story of Christmas if it becomes all about the list – getting what *you* want for Christmas?

You know, we hear a lot of talk about giving to help the less fortunate at Christmastime, and there are lots of opportunities to do that. But there's not much talk about spending less *so that* we can give more. And that's what I'd like us to consider today. To consider spending less on Christmas *and then* giving some of the money you don't spend away to help others. To spend less on Christmas so that you can spend more on things that truly matter, things that have lasting value for people. But in order to really embrace that concept, most of us are going to need to think differently—*really* differently—to change our minds about Christmas and Christmas lists and Christmas shopping for Christmas presents. I know I do. I've really struggled with this message this week. And as I've asked myself why, I've come to this conclusion: I don't want to spend less on Christmas. That's just real honest. So if you feel like this message doesn't really apply to you, I'll just preach it to myself.

Luke 3:1-6. This is a traditional passage for the season of Advent. As is so often true with the Scriptures, it turns out that the story of John the Baptist applies very well to us today. “The word of God came to John,” Luke writes. And that word was: *Prepare*. John the Baptist was a lone voice preaching out in the desert. And his message was: “*Prepare*. God's coming. So get ready.” [Get ready 'cause here He comes. Maybe we should sing that during Advent.] “Prepare the way for the Lord.” That's what the season of Advent is about right? Preparing. Not for the coming of a holiday, not for the coming of your in-laws, not for the coming of Santa and his reindeer. Preparing for the coming of Jesus. Especially the coming of Jesus now, today, in your life, in our midst. Advent reminds us that Jesus is Emmanuel: God with us. Not just God-was-with-us or God-will-be-with-us. God *is* with us. Now. Today. And not just at Christmastime—*all* the time. And we all know that. We all *say* that. And we go on buying more decorations, spending more money, accumulating more debt. It's the American way, right? But it's not the Advent way. You know that saying, ‘Less is more’? Advent should really be a time of less. But mostly it's a time not of less, but of excess.

The Word of God – Jesus – comes to us. In the midst of our excess, do we even recognize His coming? On Christmas morning, when the wrapping paper and boxes are strewn all over the living room, where's Jesus in that? Luke 3:3. Luke tells us that John came “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Now it's interesting. That word ‘Repentance’ literally in the Greek means ‘a change of mind.’ Even all these years later, we still need repentance – a change of mind – to really prepare for Jesus' coming into our lives. We need to change our minds about what is important, about our priorities, about what Christmas is really all about. If you're going to spend less so that you can give more to help others this year, if you're like me, you're going to have to change your mind.

And then that word ‘forgiveness’ literally means ‘Release from bondage or imprisonment.’ We need to change our minds so that we can be released from our bondage to bigger, better, newer, more. In our preparation Scripture, James the brother of Jesus challenges the wealthy members of the church: “You have hoarded wealth in the last days... You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.” Now I know that this isn't a very Christmasy Scripture. And you probably don't think of yourself as someone who hoards wealth or lives in luxury. But when child dies

every 15 seconds for lack of clean water, something's wrong. *Someone's* wrong. When a child in our own neighborhood comes to school hungry in the morning, something's wrong. We need to change our minds about something. It costs just \$10 to give a child clean water *for life*. Not for a year—for life.

Now let me be clear: It's not that wealth in and of itself is a bad thing. Jesus never said we shouldn't have and enjoy stuff. It's how our wealth is acquired and at what cost to others that we need to think about. And even more than that, it's the grip our wealth and our stuff have on our hearts. It's not that money in and of itself is bad. The Bible does not say "money is the root of all evil." 1 Tim. 6:10. It's the *love of money*. Jesus said: Matt. 6:21. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We said last week that worship is a heart issue. We worship what we love and we love what we worship. The problem is with what we really worship. If we're honest, some of us really do love bigger, better, newer, more. We worship what we love and we love what we worship. "Where your treasure is there your heart will be also."

Now, I suspect that this is not going to be a popular message. Most of us get great joy from giving gifts to those we love at Christmas. Look, I'm not suggesting you become Scrooge or the Grinch this year. But just like we said last week that you're going to have make some decisions, some choices, in order to worship more fully this Advent season, so it is with spending less. Church, we have to do more than just feel guilty and keep doing the same things, or worse, cover our ears and ignore the truth about the great needs all around us. We need to change our minds – to think differently – so that we will do something different. So here are some suggestions:

Plan for a debt-free holiday this year. Buy one less gift, maybe two. As a real concrete example, if everybody who worships here regularly on Sunday morning took \$20—maybe gave *one gift* less this year—If each one of the 200 or so people who come here on Sundays put that \$20 together, do you think we could do something significant for the children and families at Mt. Pleasant Elem. School who are really in need?

I read about one family engaged in the Advent Conspiracy that decided not to exchange presents and instead gave that money to a charity or cause of their own choosing. Then on Christmas Day, their time around the tree was spent listening as each person described their gift and why that cause mattered to them. I heard this week that one of our LIFE Groups, rather than exchanging gifts this year, is going to contribute together to buy a goat or a cow or something like that for a family across the world. Our Sunday School children are collecting various toiletry items to make gift packages for those helped by the Sunday Breakfast Mission and Friendship House. See the Connection.

As a way of worshipping Jesus more fully this Advent, I want to challenge us all to SPEND LESS so that we might give more from a true heart of worship. And while we think about how we can spend less this year, let us remember that God spent it all. We tend to focus on Jesus as the baby in the manger this time of year. And that's beautiful. But let's not forget that that baby was born to die for us. Jesus spent His life—poured out His very lifeblood—so that we could spend our lives for others. So that we could be blessed and live changed lives—and be a blessing to bring change to the lives of others.