

Affluenza

Ephesians 5:1-10; Philippians 4:10-19

I had *no intention* of ever learning the biblical truth that I am teaching this morning. Jesus dragged me into this, and *then* turned this truth into one of the great joys of my life.

It happened this way. In our first ministry assignment, Connie and I were leading a team of young adults to help a struggling church serve a disadvantaged community on the outskirts of Salem, Oregon. And for this work, we were supported at the rate of \$500 a month. This was 50 years ago, but even then this was *below* the national poverty level.

We got along fine at this amount for four months until we got a letter from our supervisor. He wrote: I've got *bad* news, and *good* news. The bad news is the the founding grant for this project has run out; the good news is that you are now in the regular budget . . . at \$250 a month. We were getting by on \$500, but there was no way in the world, I thought, that we could make it on \$250. So I sat down and fired off a letter to our supervisor to tell him—in no uncertain terms!—what I thought of this surprise. Then I wrote a second letter to my dad, who at the time was auditing the books of this organization. I knew my Dad could talk to our supervisor and set him straight. I put both letters in the mail, and waited (as we had to do then). My dad replied first. He had not talked to anyone. Instead, he wrote to *me*: "Stick with it, son; this will be good for you." Then I got a letter from the supervisor. He said: "We can do this *gradually*. The first month, we'll go to \$450, the next month, \$400, then \$350, and so on until we get to \$250. So Connie and I stuck with it . . . and waited for disaster to strike. The first month, at \$450, we got a couple of unexpected checks in the mail; and when we counted the total for the month, we had \$500. The second month, at \$400, I picked up some extra work, another check came, and by the end of the month, we had . . . \$500. By this time, we were intrigued, and our panic subsided to mere anxiety. The third month we started at \$350, and by the end of the month had \$500, no more, no less. The same thing happened in April; and by May, when we got to \$250, we didn't even bother counting; we knew, one way or another, we would have \$500.

We learned, without ever wanting to, that when we are generous with our time, talent, and treasure, that God will meet all our needs. And that has been our consistent experience, from that day to this, which is why I can preach this message with conviction and joy.

This morning, I am going to talk about the spiritual illness of **affluenza**.

The word, "affluenza," is a contraction—a blend of two words, "affluence" and "influenza." It is an ailment of children, youth, and adults *anywhere in the world* who have been captivated by the *sights* and *scenes* of affluence among their peers and/or in the media.

The word was likely used before this, but it was popularized in 1997 with a PBS documentary of the same name and in 2001 by the book, *Affluenza*.

This book defines affluenza as "a painful, contagious, socially-transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more."

Whether in circumstances of financial *privilege* or financial *need* the ailment of affluenza is the same: the dogged pursuit of more: more money, more comfort, more convenience, more possessions, more toys, more clothes, more devices, more security, more stuff.

Context

We can pinpoint the ailment of "affluenza" in the book of *Ephesians*.

As I said in a earlier message, the first half of *Ephesians* introduces the great truths that comprise the "good news" about Jesus.

The second half of *Ephesians* describes what these truths mean for our conduct or lifestyle. *These* three chapters are a practical handbook for Christian living.

This practical teaching begins in chapter 4, where Paul describes traits of character appropriate for believers in our relationships *with one another, in the church*.

In chapter 5, verses 1-21, Paul widens the scope of his teaching to describe behavior appropriate for believers in relation to *the surrounding culture*, which at the time was marked by *gross immorality* and *rampant materialism*.

In that culture—so much like ours today—believers could not escape the lure of greed and immorality. They lived amid powerful pressures to conform to this decadent lifestyle. Worst of all, these evil excesses were considered normal, natural, expected.

To counteract this epidemic of indulgence, Paul reacts with some of the strongest language in *Ephesians*, chapter 5, verse 3:

“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. . . For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Ephesians 5:3,5)

That is *strong* language:

Among you there must not *be even a hint* of greed—the spiritual illness that I am calling “*influenza*”—because this is improper for God’s holy people. For you can be sure, Paul insists, no greedy person has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Whew! What a decisive repudiation of one of the besetting sins of our first world culture and a terrible enticement in second and third world cultures.

Before he gets to the cure, Paul gives a stern warning, in verse 6.

“Let no one deceive you with empty words . . .

There are preachers and teachers in the wider church who proclaim the so-called “prosperity gospel,” the idea that God wants to bless us with material prosperity. This is not an *untruth*; it’s a *half-truth*, a *partial truth*, a *misapplied truth*. God *does* promise to meet our earthly needs. but it’s not the *whole truth*; these preachers and teachers are deceiving us.

In verses 9-10, Paul introduces the *overarching* cure:

Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.

Taken together, Paul's warning and *overall* cure is this:

Don't be deceived by the perspective of the surrounding culture or taken in by preachers who have succumbed to the prevailing mindset; instead, find out *what pleases the Lord*, what is *good* and *right* and *true*.

To find out what pleases the Lord in relation to "greed" or *affluenza*, we could look almost anywhere in the Bible.

As you heard from Angie and Judah and Gail in the passages they read, there is clear and helpful teaching about money all through the Bible.

The apostle Paul's most extensive teaching is in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9.

As one of many passages I *could* use,

I'm going to focus on a portion of *Philippians*, a small NT book which is, basically, a thank you letter in response to a contribution that the Philippian church had sent to assist Paul in his ministry.

In Philippians 4, verses 10-13, Paul writes:

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Within the *overall cure* of "living in the light" of what pleases the Lord, there are three *specific* medications for affluenza:

contentment, **generosity**, and **the pursuit of God**.

The first medication for affluenza is **contentment**.

In this passage, Paul is not testifying to wealth or affluence; the witness of *his* life is *contentment*. He writes:

I have learned the secret of being content in *any and every* situation, whether *well fed or hungry*, whether living *in plenty or in want*.

And this is the secret: I can [live in contentment] through Christ who gives me strength.

Basically, God is saying to us—in our circumstances, whatever they are—through the testimony of the apostle Paul:

“Stick with it, son; stick with it, daughter; this will be good for you.”

When Connie and I were living on \$500 a month, we had to decide which bills to pay, and which ones could wait. When our dryer gave out—in Oregon where it rained nearly all the time—we strung clothesline in our dining room over a linoleum floor. When Erin, our oldest daughter, was six months old and we read in a baby book that parents and a child should not be in the same bedroom, and since the house had only one bedroom, we moved out . . . and slept in sleeping bags on the living room floor. And it was *okay*; we were content; we were learning that we could trust Jesus to give us strength for this.

The second medication for affluenza is **generosity**.

Generosity in the NT is not *tame* or *boring*.

It is *bold*! It is *daring*! At times it even seems *reckless*.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Macedonian believers, in extreme poverty themselves, gave more than they could afford, “*beyond their ability*,” to help believers in Jerusalem hard pressed by famine.

Zacchaeus gave *half* of his possessions to the poor.

Jesus commended a poor widow who put two small copper coins, worth only a few cents, into the offering; but it was *all she had to live on!*

With this kind of *radical* generosity in mind, listen to what Paul writes next, in verses 17-19:

Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

When we give our time, talent, and treasure with *daring* generosity this is a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God; and, in response, in the phrase Paul uses, God “*credits more to our account*.” Paul explains what he means by this in 2 Corinthians 9, verses 6 and 8:

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. . . And God is able to bless you

abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Jesus was even more emphatic in what he taught (Luke 6:38):

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Paul sums this up, concisely, in his statement in verse 19

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

No matter what our level of income, we can afford to be boldly generous because God will bless us abundantly, so that in all things, at all times, having all we need, we will abound in very good work.

This is *part* of the *whole* truth, a wonderfully reassuring part, a part that gives us peace of mind, and frees us to love boldly, give lavishly, and serve joyfully.

One day, during the time Connie and I were sleeping on the living room floor and hanging diapers in the dining room, a van pulled into our driveway and friends unloaded a clothes dryer and hide-a-bed sofa.

By their generosity God met our need for dry clothes and more comfortable sleep.

Nothing like that had ever happened to us before, and we were reminded, again, that God *does* meet our needs.

I *also* concluded, wrongly, that God was into major appliances; so when our garden, which was in some of the richest soil in Oregon, was about to produce a bountiful harvest—

far beyond what our refrigerator could hold—

I knew God *could* and *would* meet our needs;

so I began to pray for a freezer—

and kept looking out the window, watching for another van.

No van ever came; our garden was nearly ready to be harvested;

and *that very week* on the way back from the grocery store,

Connie noticed, for the first time, a frozen food locker along her route.

She stopped, went inside to inquire,

learned that there was *one* freezer compartment available, for \$17 a year.

That we *could* afford, and she rented it.

By that experience we learned that God is creative; he does the unexpected; but in one way or another, he *does* meet our needs.

Finally, the third medication is **the pursuit of God**.

The sinful core of “affluenza” is the dogged pursuit of money. By contrast, the corrective medication is a determined pursuit *of God*. This is what Jesus was communicating when he taught:

But seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:33).

This is what Paul was communicating when he assured us (in 2 Cor. 9:8):

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, *you will abound in every good work* [for God]

This is why Paul could be content in any and every situation, and why he was confident God would meet all his needs, because he had one great ambition: Philippians 3, verses 13-14:

“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

When we get caught up in the purposes of God, our work, whatever it is, is *not* just a way to earn money. Our work becomes a way to serve God and our neighbor. Though we may receive compensation, the primary objective of our work is not to earn lots of money, to advance on our career path, or even our own personal fulfillment. When we see our work as God’s assignment to serve others, our work becomes a calling, a vocation (1 Corinthians 7:17). We no longer ask: “How can I make the most money? Instead, we ask: “How, with my abilities and opportunities, can I be of greatest service to God and other people?”

When we pursue God, above all else, as a *higher calling*, work and money and possessions take their proper place *lower* on our priority list.

Long before COVID-19, affluenza has been a worldwide pandemic. Whether in *affluent* places or *impoverished* places, people have been afflicted this painful, contagious, socially-transmitted condition of discontent, overspending, debt, and anxiety, resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.

But . . . when we make the choice to live with **contentment, generosity,** and **the pursuit of God,** we will discover the secret of trusting Christ and live in joyful assurance of his promise:
“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

Warren L. Hoffman
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