

First Presbyterian Church, Sylacauga, AL  
The Rev. James B. Stanford III  
September 27, 2009

Ecclesiastes 5:10  
“The Affluenza Epidemic”  
*“The lover of money will not be satisfied with money;  
nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.”*

(Note: The theme of this sermon started out as “When Dreams Become Nightmares” but by Sunday I decided to use as the title --- “The Affluenza Epidemic”.)

There is a widely circulated essay that somehow got attributed to George Carlin. He was called a comedian, but much of his humor was too grass and his language too course to repeat, especially when he emphatically denied having anything to do with it. Numerous other authors have been cited, but be that as it may, it presents “a neat laundry list” of the problems of today. Here is some of what it says:

The paradox of our time in history is that we have  
taller buildings, but shorter tempers;  
wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints.  
We spend more, but have less;  
We buy more, but enjoy it less.  
We have bigger houses and smaller families;  
More conveniences, but less time;  
We have more degrees, but less sense  
More knowledge, but less judgment;  
More experts, but more problems;  
More medicine, but less wellness.  
We drink too much, smoke too much,  
Spend too recklessly, laugh too little,  
Drive too fast, get too angry too quickly,  
Stay up too late, get up too tired,  
Read too seldom, watch TV too much,  
And prayer too little.  
We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values.  
We talk too much, love too seldom and hat too often.  
We’ve learned how to make a living, but not a life;  
We’ve added years to life, not life to years.  
We’ve been all the way to the moon and back,  
But have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor.  
We’ve conquered outer space, but not inner space.  
We’ve done larger things, but not better things.  
We’ve split the atom, but not our prejudice.  
We write more, but learn less.  
We plan more, but accomplish less.

**We've learned to rush, but not to wait.  
We build more computers to hold more information  
To produce more copies than ever, but have less communication.**

**These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion,  
Tall men, and short character;  
Steep profits, and shallow relationships.  
These are the times of world peace, but domestic (unrest) warfare  
More leisure, but less fun; more kinds of food, but less nutrition.  
These are days of two incomes, but more divorce;  
Of fancier houses, but broken homes.**

## **I. The American Dream and the American Nightmare**

**It continues but I am sure that you get the picture. For years the American Dream has been to achieve success and satisfy the desire for material possessions. Success is measured by the stuff we possess. This is a true story: a sixteen-year-old told her father: "All I want is a car --- just a car. I won't ask for anything else if I could just have a car." Her father scrimped, saved and borrowed the rest in order to buy a car within his means. When the daughter saw it, she said, "Daddy! I can't drive that. What would my friend think?"**

**I have been reading THREE CUPS OF TEA, the story of Greg Mortenson whose mission is to promote peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan by building schools. The king of the Himalayan country of Bhutan, said to him that the measure of a nation's success is not its gross national produce ... but its gross national happiness.**

**What was the American Dream has become the American Nightmare. I hope you caught my play on words in the sermon title. "Affluenza" is the constant need for more and bigger and better stuff ... so that today the average credit debt is over \$ 9,000 a person for every citizen of the United States. Our children haven't inherited this problem but every one of them at birth gets saddled with the nation's credit problems. This overuse of credit is not limited to purchases with credit cards, but extends to car loans, mortgages and other loans.**

**Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote the words to "God of Grace and God of Glory" back in 1930. The hymn speaks of our being "rich in things --- poor in soul." We sang those words in the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse of the morning's first hymn. Did you realize what you were saying? "Shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul..."**

## **II. The Deeper Problem Within**

**If I may, for a moment, I want to use a Gospel story to illustrate the deeper problem within. I do so to point out that the problem is not new, but perhaps it is more serious than it once was.**

Three of the gospels tell the story of the rich, young ruler. Mark's gospel is the only one that suggests that he is rich. Matthew's gospel is the only one that says he is young. Luke's gospel is the only one that calls him a ruler. The fact that he shows up in all three of these gospels is a pretty good indication that his story is true.

Barbara Brown Taylor observes that Christians act as if this story is not about money. It is about money, possessions, and material wealth. Well, they did not have nuclear power in Jesus' day, as far as Jesus is concerned, money is like nuclear power. It may be able to do a lot of good, but most of us don't know how to handle it. We get contaminated by its power, and we contaminate others by using it carelessly --- by wanting it too desperately or using it too manipulatively or believe in it too fiercely or defending it too cruelly.

The gospel story says that when this man asked Jesus what he needed to do, and Jesus replied that he should go and sell what he has and give it to the poor ... when he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions. Then, Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark10:22-23)

You and I have to be free to receive God's gift. You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with ... or if your hands are clenched tightly around what you have. You cannot make room for it if all your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go.

That rich, young ruler went away sorrowful, because he understood at once that deep down he was not free. Oh, indeed his wealth and possessions were supposed to make him free, but as he knelt in front of Jesus, he understood that it was not so. There may have been other, but as far as I know, this man is the only person who walked away from Jesus' invitation to follow Him.

Deep down our problem is the same, because there are the children, the mortgage, the aging parents, the doctor's bill, the economy, the personal debt, and the future. There are days when threading a camel through a needle seems easier than following Jesus.

### **III. The Bible's Solution**

I would suggest that, every morning, you and I need to pray: "Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn't be there and help me to be single-minded in my focus on you and my pursuit of you. By praying this every day, God has the chance to deal with our problems deep down at the roots.

- (a) With God's help we can simplify our lives and silence the voices constantly telling us that we need more.
- (b) With God's help we can live below, not above, our means.
- (c) With God's help we can build into our budgets the money to buy with cash instead of credit.
- (d) With God's help we can hear Jesus Christ calling us to simplicity ... faithfulness ... and generosity.

I've asked some of our young people to pass out some "cling cards". We'll look at them in just a moment, but while they are doing that, may I share an experience that Philip Gulley writes about?

Back last fall, when our country was at the beginning of financial crisis with several major banks closing, one night while the nation's leaders gathered at the White House to try to rescue our financial system from economic peril, this gentle Quaker pastor took a walk out under the stars. (If we ever get a break in the rain and storms, you and I might like to do this.)

It was dark, and the stars twinkled clearly in the night sky. He could see the Big Dipper and the North Star, called Polaris. It occurred to him that Polaris was 430 light years away, which meant he was seeing it ... as it was reflecting light in 1578 ... long before the world had ever heard of sub-prime mortgages. In 1578, the astronomer Galileo was 14 years old. Galileo would grow up to inform us that the Earth was not the fixed center of the universe. For such radical thinking, he was considered a heretic. The Roman Catholic Church considered itself and the Earth the center of the universe, and so Galileo was placed under house arrest, where he spent the remainder of his life. However, it gave Galileo the opportunity to write one of his finest books that effectively launched the field of physics. But remember! The light of the North Star Polaris predates all of that.

It is a matter of perspective, and it should remind us what Galileo taught so long ago: that the Earth is not the center of the universe ... that the universe still spins merrily along, as it has for billions of years. This means that we are not the center of the universe or of life. The challenges we face today do not mean that the world is ending. A part of our world may be changing, to be sure. The important thing is to consider what we learn from this and where we are in our relationship to money, possessions and materials wealth.

God told Jeremiah in chapter 29, verse 11: "I know the plans I have for you ... plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

You are being given something about the size of an index card. It is called a cling card, because you can peel off the back and adhere it to bathroom mirror, a windshield, an over-the-kitchen-sink windowpane ... just about wherever it will catch your attention. I have put my on my bathroom window so that I see it morning and night and every time I wash my hands.

You will receive more information about this card in both a letter and a bulletin insert, so I'm not going to spend much time with it now. You will note that the six key financial principles are based on scripture references. Please take the time to read the Bible passage and see what it is saying about how we can resist an "affluenza epidemic."

### Prayer

As we pray, I invite you to repeat this prayer after me, just quietly under your breath.

**Change my heart, oh God.  
Clean me out inside.  
Make me new.  
Heal my wants and desires.  
Help me to value my possessions as gifts  
... as blessings to be used.  
Help me to love you.  
Teach me simplicity.  
Teach me generosity  
... and help me have joy.  
Take my life, Lord,  
...I offer it up to you.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Resources**

**Clayton A. Cobb, "Lessons from Life: Live Generously," St. Peter's By the Sea Presbyterian Church, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA, 10-20-2001**

**Nancy D. Dean, "Awaking the Wisdom Within,"**

**Philip Gulley, "All the Ways To Be Rich", GRACE TALKS WITH PHILLIP GULLEY ([www.philipgulley.org/GRACETALKS.htm](http://www.philipgulley.org/GRACETALKS.htm))**

**Adam Hamilton, introductory sermon, ENOUGH, p. 63-65**

**Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, THREE CUPS OF TEA: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time**

**H. Stephen Shoemaker, "Simplicity and Trustfulness," Myers Park Baptist Church, Charlotte, NC, 2-10-08**

**Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Opposite of Rich," THE PREACHING LIFE, p. 127-132**