

When my wife Sandy and I were first married we lived a hundred metres or so from a corner grocery store. I regularly stopped by to pick up a newspaper and over time struck up something of a friendship with George and Rita, the young couple who owned the store. I've never met harder working people. The shop was open sunrise to sunset seven days a week, 364 days a year. Christmas day was the only day off George and Rita gave themselves. So you can imagine my surprise when one afternoon George announced he and Rita had started a second business. Where on earth would they find time for a second business?

I quickly discovered George and Rita had become Amway distributors. The inevitable question followed – “Scott, would you like to join the Amway business too?” I paused for a moment before politely declining George's offer, but he was not easily deterred. George hit me with what he felt sure was an irrefutable argument – “Scott, don't you want more money?”

No one had ever put the question to me that directly. With more money I could have more “financial security” and a lot more of the “good things” in life. Again I paused before looking George in the eye and saying “No. I don't want more.” At this stage of my life it was an easy answer – Sandy and I were young, newly married and without the pressures that come with a mortgage, children and higher expectations. I was throwing everything I had into full time youth ministry and Sandy into study, and although it would change as we grew older, at that stage of life we seemed to have everything we wished.

George was shocked. His mouth dropped open as though I had just announced that I had been stealing from his shop. He could not comprehend it. How could somebody not want more money and all the things it could buy?

George and Rita were a lovely young couple but one of the most extreme examples I have seen of people caught up in the thrall of consumerism. They wanted the bigger house in a better neighbourhood, the new cars in the driveway, the overseas holidays, and they were prepared to do whatever it took to get there.

While George and Rita represent a particularly intense example I suspect we are all to one degree or another caught up in the thrall of consumerism. Certainly as Sandy and I have grown older and wealthier the allures of consumerism have grown stronger. We live in a culture where it is normal to allow our desire to have more of the “good things” in life to shape our dreams, ambitions, our working life, and the way we use our time, energy and resources. Although we may not reflect on it very often, this is exacting a heavy toll on our relationship with God, on others and on the planet.

Consumerism as a Vision of the Good Life

Consumerism is the conviction that the good life is one in which we consume more and more things. It has so captured our culture that we rarely stop to question it. We simply think it is normal to get bigger and better houses, bigger and better toys (whether our toys of choice be fashion, boats, cars or travel), bigger and better TVs, and on and on.

Of course, few would argue that more stuff alone will bring happiness – when surveyed Australians point to things such as relationships and health as the most important sources of happiness.¹ Yet if we are convinced that consuming alone is not enough to guarantee the good life, we are also convinced that relationships alone are not enough. And so we bring consumption and relationships together in the conviction that the good life is one in which we consume an ever increasing number of goods and services and enjoy them in the company of family and friends.

This has driven dramatic changes in our material standards of living. When I was a child my grandparents bought a brand new Holden Statesman Caprice, then Holden's top of the range luxury vehicle. I've never been much of a car enthusiast but for forty years that car has stuck in my memory. Grandpa's Caprice was filled with exotic accessories that left me amazed: air-conditioning, electric windows and a six speaker stereo cassette system! These were unheard of in the family sedan of my childhood. In mum and dad's car we had manual window winders, using them was the closest we got to any form of air-conditioning, and if you wanted to listen to anything other than AM radio you had to carry a battery-powered portable stereo system on your lap.

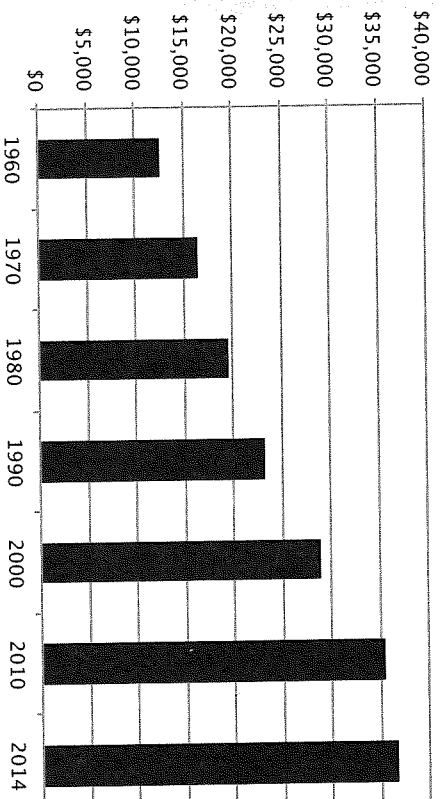
How different things are today. I own a 2006 base model Kia Rio, one of the most basic small cars on the market, and it came equipped with everything that seemed such an extravagance on my grandfather's Caprice. What were luxuries forty years ago have now become standard items in every new vehicle.

What has happened with cars has happened right across Australian society. Things we once considered the preserve of the wealthy have become commonplace in the homes of many Australians.

On the one hand this has been fuelled by the popularising of knowledge and technology. Over time technology becomes cheaper and so things formerly accessible only to the wealthy become accessible to more of us. On the other hand our rising standards of living are made possible by rising incomes. I was born in 1965 and between the time I was born and the year 2005 real disposable household income – the income available to households after taking out inflation, taxes and mortgage interest payments – more than tripled!²

Not only are many things becoming relatively cheaper but we can afford a lot more of them.

Annual household consumption expenditure per person



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 5206.0 Australian National Accounts: Effects of Inflation removed

And our spending has followed suit. If we convert consumption expenditure for the past fifty years to its equivalent in today's dollars, we can see that Australians are spending almost three times as much today as we did in 1960. In 1960 each Australian spent an average of \$12,663 per year on goods and services. By 2014 this had grown to \$36,627.³

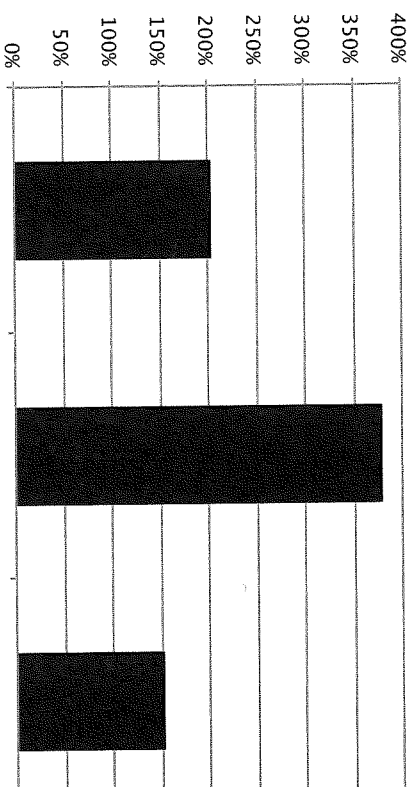
So where has all this extra consuming been focused? To begin with, our houses are getting bigger. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics,

the typical house in Australia has evolved from having three bedrooms, one bathroom and separate living areas into a more open plan, including a fourth bedroom and ensuite facilities. Popular extras, such as rumpus rooms, walk-in wardrobes, walk-in kitchen pantries and the like may add to the overall size of modern homes.⁴

Australians now boast the largest homes in the world,⁵ ironically at a time when the number of people living in each house is in decline.

We spend a lot more on what we put inside our homes. After allowing for inflation, spending on household furnishings and appliances, from lounges to air-conditioners and fridges, has doubled since 1960. We are much more likely to have a new car in the driveway (spending on vehicles has almost quadrupled) and when we get out and about we're spending more than twice as much on recreation. Despite the fact that in 1960 people wore clothes, and that clothes have, in real terms, dropped in price, today we somehow feel the need to spend one and a half times as much on clothing!⁶ If Australia is a lucky country, in material terms at least, Australians alive today are the luckiest of all.

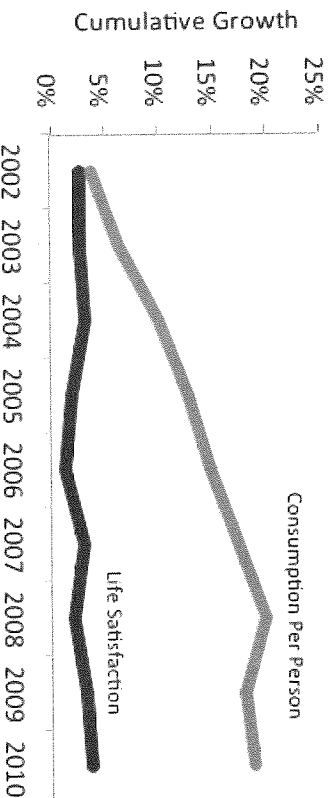
Per person consumption increases 1960-2010



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 5206.0 Australian National Accounts: Chain Volume Measures - i.e. effects of inflation removed

With such dramatically improved material standards of living you might expect Australians to have much higher levels of life satisfaction. Yet this is not the case. Since 2001 a research unit at Deakin University has been asking Australians how satisfied they are with their lives - with their health, relationships, standard of living, feelings of safety, sense of community and life achievements. The answers are compiled into a single life satisfaction rating, with a zero score indicating we feel completely dissatisfied with our lives and a score of 100% indicating

Consumption and life satisfaction



Source: Australian Centre on Quality of Life Survey Reports 1-25 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, 5206.0

we feel completely satisfied. Despite the fact that consumption levels have risen by 20% over the ten years since the survey began, there has been no significant improvement in people's feelings of well-being. At the turn of the millennium we were around 73% satisfied with life and a decade later this had risen only slightly to 76%.⁷

This is quite an extraordinary finding. We live in a culture that leads us to believe we will only be happy as we consume more. Yet the reality is that as we have gotten more we haven't become any more satisfied with our lives.

Even more startling are reports that vast numbers of us believe we can't afford everything we need. In 2002 the Australia Institute commissioned a poll in which people were asked to agree or disagree with the statement "You cannot afford to buy everything you really need." An astonishing 62% agreed, including almost half of people from households in the highest income brackets.⁸ We are the wealthiest generation to have ever lived in Australia, yet more than half of us believe we can't afford everything we need?

Social commentators suggest the reason may lie in our tendency to compare ourselves with others. Once we are able to meet our essential needs, what matters to us is not our absolute but our relative standard of living. We look at the people around us and measure our standard of living against theirs. My 46-centimetre TV with tinny speakers may have seemed perfectly adequate for the last ten years, but when all my friends have 120-centimetre flat screens with theatre quality surround sound it's easy to feel that what I have just isn't good enough. When all my friends are 'upgrading' from older three-bedroom homes to four bedroom homes with multiple bathrooms it seems normal to do the same. In fact when we speak of this as "getting ahead" it means staying in my single-bathroom, three-bedroom home can feel like being left behind.

As this process kicks in everyone's living standards rise, creating new expectations as to what a 'normal' standard of living looks like. As Tim Soutphommasane puts it,

There are higher expectations and aspirations about what a good life should involve. Our houses are getting bigger. We dine out at restaurants more frequently. Overseas holidays are now the norm and no longer the exception. Expectations about comfortable and prosperous living have become all consuming.⁹

The end result? Even as we have grown wealthier than our grandparents could have imagined, we have redefined what the good life looks like. We have become convinced that things once considered luxuries are now necessary, not to survival, but to thriving. In a consumer culture

the assumption is that we will always be improving our material standards of living in line with everyone else, always accessing new goods and services, always seeking out new experiences. For consumerism the good life is always about consuming 'more'.

Consumerism as Greed

A preoccupation with acquisition and consumption is nothing new. The Scriptures define this as greed, the "strong desire to acquire more and more material possessions or to possess more things than other people have, irrespective of need."¹⁰

The Gospel of Luke protests by throwing up stories that expose the greedy: Jesus' story of a man who believes life consists in the abundance of his possessions (12:13-21); a rich man living in the lap of unimaginable luxury who ignores the beggar at his gate (16:19-31); a wealthy ruler who cannot bear to part with his money (18:18-30); and Zaccheus the tax collector who confesses that prior to his conversion he cheated his neighbours (19:1-10).

Warnings against greed are frequent. Jesus tells us that, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24). In Ecclesiastes we are told that "whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income" (5:10). First Timothy tells us that "people who want to get rich fall into temptation and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (6:9-10).

Do we not find ourselves aptly described by these verses? Do we not find ourselves secretly wishing that we were richer? Do we not commonly complain that we just don't have enough? A little earlier I mentioned research into the phenomenon of life satisfaction. One of the interesting things it has turned up is that the psychological boost we get from a pay rise or a new purchase is very short-lived. We convince ourselves that this new purchase will make all the difference to us, and for a short while it does. But before long we return to the same level of life satisfaction we had before. So we start looking to the next pay rise or the next purchase, believing that this one will make all the difference, that then we'll have everything we want. But of course it doesn't work that way. We have vastly more than our grandparent's generation, unimaginable wealth compared to most people on the planet, yet find ourselves wanting more. In biblical terms this is a manifestation of greed.

This evaluation should shock us. Many of us like to point the finger at the excessive salaries of corporate bosses and complain how greedy they are. But you don't need to be a captain of industry to be greedy; you just have to be someone who has sufficient but, instead of being content with what you have, keeps wanting and acquiring more. And that's true of just about everyone in a consumerist society!

Scripture even goes so far as to suggest greed is a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5; Matthew 6:24). Idolatry occurs when we make something other than God the organising principle of our lives. Rather than allowing God to determine our hopes, our dreams, our ambitions, our values, our use of time, energy and resources, we allow something other than God to do so. That was certainly the case for George and Rita (described at the start of this chapter). Their entire lives were shaped around the desire to acquire more. But, as Jesus warned us, we cannot take a speck of sawdust out of George and Rita's eyes and ignore the great plank in our own. In a consumer society we are all touched by greed. To one degree or another just about all of us allow the desire for more to shape what we hope for, what we dream about, what we aim to achieve in life, what we value and how we expend our time, energy and resources.

The Good Life According to Scripture

Over against the consumerist vision, a biblical vision of the good life is one that is rich in love for God and others while sharing the beauty and abundance of the earth with our fellow human beings.

Consider the first part of that definition: *a life that is rich in love for God and others*. Jesus taught that the very centre of a godly lifestyle is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:34–40). The limus test of “success” is not therefore what one has acquired or consumed but how well one has loved. It is to this that Jesus' followers will devote their time, energy and resources.

It's significant to realise that when Jesus called people to love their neighbours as themselves he was not saying anything controversial. He was simply repeating the command of the Old Testament law (Leviticus 19:18). What was controversial was his definition of ‘neighbour’. Many religious teachers of his time interpreted ‘neighbour’ to mean their fellow Israelite. Anyone outside this group was not a neighbour needing to be loved. When Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan he challenged this interpretation, calling his followers to love any person in need, whether they be an Israelite, Samaritan or an enemy (Luke 10:25–37; Matthew 5:43–48).

Here is the first radical difference between the good life to which Jesus calls us and the good life envisaged by consumerism. Consumerism tells us that while we should not harm people outside our circle of family and friends, neither do we have any great obligation to them. Consequently it is good and proper to indulge ourselves, our families and friends with as many goods, services and experiences as possible. Jesus however calls us to expand the circles of our love, to proactively seek out those in need and care for them using the resources God has given us.

This calls for a radical rethink of how we consume the earth's resources, which leads to the second part of my definition of the good life: *sharing the beauty and abundance of the earth with our fellow human beings*.

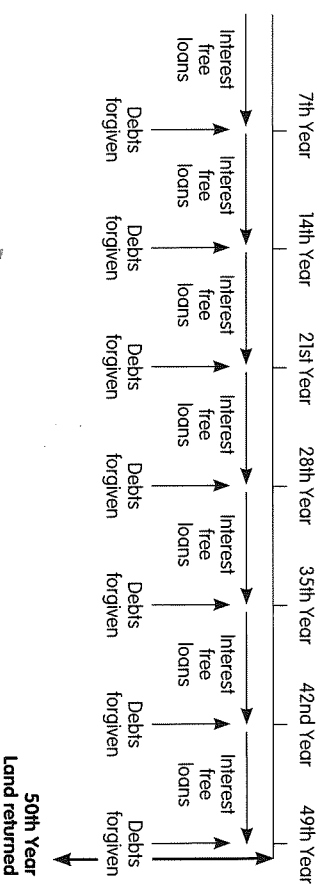
Humankind was not created to eke out a miserable existence on a harsh and barren planet. Rather the bible pictures an abundant and beautiful world given for our enjoyment. Genesis 1 describes a planet filled with rich vegetation that is gifted to humanity and the other creatures for food. Genesis 2 describes the creation of a garden that is richly watered and adorned with “all kinds of trees...that were pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Genesis 2:8). Notice the emphasis not only on the capacity of the garden to provide food but also on its aesthetic appeal. Turn to Psalm 104 and you'll find a celebration of the wonders of the earth and a God who “makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate – bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts” (Psalm 104:14–15). Come to the New Testament and 1 Timothy affirms that “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Timothy 4:4). It is clear that God intends our hearts to soar at the wonders of his creation and our bodies to be made strong by the abundance he has provided. God expects us to consume the good things he has given and to enjoy them.

But our enjoyment is to be framed by a strong sense of community. Richard Bauckham reminds us that

the two interdependent a priori expectations of a modern economy – that individuals expect constantly to improve their standard of living and that the economy is expected to grow without limit – were completely unknown to biblical and other ancient societies. The classic picture of utopian existence – ‘everyone under his vine and his fig tree’ (1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; etc.) – is simply the life of the ordinary peasant family at its best: owning their own modest smallholding, producing enough to live and with leisure enough to enjoy it, and with no threat from the rapacious rich or foreign invasion.¹¹

In the biblical eras most people were subsistence farmers striving to feed themselves from small plots of land. Although they may have used small surpluses to trade for clothes, seed or equipment, generally they grew their own food, made their own clothes, built their own houses, bred their own animals, and repaired their own farm equipment. In this context “prosperity” did not mean acquiring more; it meant gratefully consuming what was provided from one’s land and respecting the right of others to do the same.

Of course, in a fallen world this vision was commonly under threat from pestilence, disease, natural disaster, conflict and greed. The Old Testament law included a raft of measures to protect against this. For example, interest-free loans were to be offered to anyone in need and all outstanding loans were to be forgiven every seventh year (Exodus 22:25–26; Deuteronomy 15:1–11).



Access to affordable credit enabled farmers to cope if they had a bad crop or fell ill during harvest season. It enabled landless labourers to survive when employment was scarce. It enabled widows to meet their needs. Forgiveness of unpaid debts every seventh year ensured that those who borrowed would not be weighed down by permanent debt.

Where a family decided to sell their land, it was not the land they were selling, but the crops remaining until the Year of Jubilee, which was to occur every 50 years. The family could buy their land back at anytime by paying for the crops remaining until the Jubilee year, and, failing that, the land was to be returned free of charge in the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25:23–28). In the meantime if any Israelite lacked land, they were guaranteed a portion of the fields would be set aside for them to harvest (Deuteronomy 24:19–22; Leviticus 19:9–10).

It was this community framing of prosperity that was designed to constrain exploitation, acquisitiveness and greed and ensure every person enjoyed the abundance of the land. The only way one person could acquire a large land holding while others went without would be for these provisions in the Law to be neglected. People could only add field to field (Isaiah 5:8) by exploiting the vulnerability of others rather than offering them loans, by force, or by failure to practise the principles of jubilee. People could only go hungry if the wealthy ignored the call to offer interest-free loans, observe the jubilee, and invite the landless to share in the harvest. It is no surprise then that in the eyes of the Bible writers, the determination to possess more of the earth and its resources was the grievous sin of greed, nothing less than taking what belonged to others, and that the presence of hunger was a sign of sinfully dysfunctional communities (e.g. Ecclesiastes 5:8–12; Isaiah 58; Matthew 6:24; Luke 6:24–26).

Luke 12: Rich Fools and Wise Disciples

Now we can make sense of Jesus’ parable of the rich fool, which warns against greed (Luke 12:13–21). As in the Old Testament era, at the time of Jesus the bulk of the population were peasant farmers. Some worked their own subsistence plots, some worked as tenant farmers (i.e. the land belonged to someone else and the farmer paid the landlord a portion of the produce as rent) and some were day labourers hiring themselves out for whatever farm work was available. Much of the land was owned by wealthy landlords who lived in town and had tenants and day labourers working their estates for them.¹² When Jesus begins his parable with, “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest” (verse 16) it is one of these wealthy, city-dwelling landlords he has in mind.

For the peasantry, which in Galilee likely comprised 80% or more of the population, life was difficult. Some would have enjoyed sufficient income to stay above subsistence level; some would have managed to just meet their subsistence needs; and others would have lived below subsistence levels, unable to meet their basic needs for food, shelter and clothing.¹³ Thanks to the Roman occupation peasant farmers were under particular pressure.

Having already suffered under repeated Roman military conquests...they were under the demands for tithes to the Temple, for Roman tribute, and for taxes from Herodian rulers now resident in Galilee itself. Families had sunk into debt. Having exhausted the reserves and goodwill of their neighbours, they were forced to borrow at high rates of interest from the wealthy...¹⁴

Farmers whose land might otherwise have provided sufficient were forced either to borrow or to go hungry. When those who borrowed could not repay their debts, they had no option but to sell their land and seek employment as tenant farmers or as day labourers. They joined the ranks of the landless, which included indebted farmers like themselves, widows and fatherless children and the disabled – the blind, the lame, the leper, the possessed who we meet in the pages of the Gospels – who were unable to work the land and, in the absence of any other opportunities, were forced into a life of begging. Hunger, disease and early death became their day-to-day experience.

When Jesus speaks of a wealthy man whose land produces such abundant crops that he needs to build new storehouses (Luke 12:13–21) he is speaking of a someone who has ignored God's vision for a community where everyone farms their own land, gets to enjoy the fruit of their labours, is healthy and is free from conquest or the rapacious rich. Rather the rich man is interested in nothing other than securing his own comfort (verse 19). To acquire his large landholding he has almost certainly exploited the vulnerability of debt-ridden peasants rather than offering them interest-free loans or observing the principles of jubilee. At the very least he has chosen to build bigger barns rather than invite his hungry neighbours to share in the harvest. As early church preacher John Chrysostom noted, the rich man did not need more storehouses for all his grain, for he already had storehouses aplenty, namely "the mouths of the poor."¹⁵ Here is a man indifferent to his neighbour, indifferent to God's vision for community, but sold out to securing a comfortable life.

Over against the self-centred lifestyle of the rich fool, Jesus commends a lifestyle focused on the kingdom of God (Luke 12:22–34). The kingdom is the inbreaking reign of God, where God restores individuals, communities and creation to his original intentions. This began in a new way with Jesus, continues in the world through Jesus and will be realised in full with Jesus' return. People who are focused on the kingdom receive God's gracious gift of forgiveness and follow in the way of Jesus. They focus their lives, time, energy and resources on living in the kingdom, living out the values of the kingdom, and bringing the healing love and justice of the kingdom to the broken and dark places of their world. Kingdom-focused people do not simply add faith in Jesus onto their existing lifestyle. They embrace a completely different lifestyle centred around the kingdom of God.

Consumerism, driven by the same self-centred greed that possessed the rich fool, drives us away from lives centred on the kingdom. Indeed the rich fool sounds like the poster child for Australian consumerism – a decent sort of person who feels little obligation to people outside his

circle of family and friends and has his heart set on a life of comfort and pleasure. We Australians are the rich fools of our age, missing the opportunity to find our life in seeking the reign of God. We turn our backs on building the global community God longs to build with us in favour of a diminished existence in which we reduce the good life to acquiring as much as we can, experiencing as much as we can and consuming as much as we can. And it is not only unbelievers who are captured by this. Affluent Christians can, to all intents and purposes, live like the rich fool with Jesus as a hobby simply tacked onto our consumerist lives.

Consuming and a Jesus-Shaped Good Life

What we need is a radical reorientation to consumption in which we see consuming not as the essence of living the good life but as a means to living a life rich in love for God and others. Rather than assuming it is normal to acquire and consume more, we need to ask what we need to consume in order to love God, love our neighbour and thankfully steward the earth.

We do need to consume – we need food to nourish our bodies; clothes to preserve our modesty and keep us warm; homes to shelter us from the weather and a place to practise hospitality; phones and computers to communicate; vehicles (whether our own or public transport) to get around; time out enjoying the beauty of the earth to renew our spirit. But seeing these as tools that help us love God, love our neighbour and steward the earth places consumption in proper perspective. It allows us to use our time, energy and resources to become ever more rich in our knowledge and worship of God; to expand our circle of loved ones to include the marginalised, the poor and those in need; and to enjoy God's good earth in a way that respects the right of others to do the same.

Can you imagine what would happen if we did this? If we devoted our time, energy and wealth to seeking God, growing in our knowledge of God and living out God's will for us; to building households, churches and communities where we are genuinely welcomed, loved and feel that we belong; if we committed ourselves to enjoying the earth's beauty and abundance in a way that defended the right of others to do the same?

Perhaps instead of renovating our homes we would spend the money on mission or poverty alleviation. Rather than working long hours to have all the creature comforts we might do less paid work and more volunteer work or spend more time immersing ourselves in knowing God. Perhaps we would be less focused on pursuing high-paying

careers and more focused on careers that improve the lives of people and the planet. Perhaps we'd redefine "getting ahead" as giving more rather than getting more. Perhaps then and only then we could claim we have started to break free from the false worship of consumerism.

Putting it into Practice

In coming chapters I will suggest specific lifestyle changes for achieving this. For now there is one key action you can take – make a commitment to abandon a lifestyle defined by consumerism in order to pursue the truly good life God calls you to.

A good way to start is to write down your main goals for your future, then ask whether these look like the aspirations of somebody whose life is focused on loving God, loving others and respectfully stewarding the earth. I suspect that many of our great life ambitions are shaped more by the values and aspirations of consumerism than they are by the values and aspirations of Jesus. Where does growth in your knowledge and worship of God feature in your life aspirations? Where does pouring out your resources so that others may hear of Jesus and that the poor may enjoy their fair share of the abundance of the earth figure in your life aspirations?

Now that you've evaluated your goals, make a decision to replace your consumerism-shaped goals with kingdom-shaped ones. If your life goal is to use your time, energy and resources to love God and love others, what would your top five aspirations be? Let your imagination run wild. How would your work patterns differ if you took seriously the call to know God? How would your spending patterns differ if one of your life goals was to see as many lost people as possible come to Christ and as many poor people as possible lifted out of poverty?

Identify one new goal you can take up immediately. Ask yourself what you need to do to make that happen and create an action plan. Break the process into simple steps that you can achieve and give yourself a timetable for achieving them. Then, once you have started to make progress in that one area, go back to your list of goals and pick another area to work on.

By implementing these actions we will gradually free ourselves from the diminished vision of the good life that comes from consumerism and replace it with the glorious vision of the good life that comes from Jesus.

CHAPTER 2

Consuming as if People Matter

#1

Rejecting Greed, Embracing Generosity

Next to Christianity, advertising is the greatest force in the world. And I say that without sacrilege or disrespect. Advertising makes people discontented. It makes them want things they don't have. Without discontent, there is no progress, no achievement.

MORRIS HITE, FORMER CEO,
TRACY-LOCKE ADVERTISING

Command those who are rich in this present world...to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share.

THE APOSTLE PAUL,
FIRST LETTER TO TIMOTHY