

Curing Affluenza

Philippians 4:11-13

Introduction Defining Affluenza

A number of years ago, a documentary was filmed about the way consumerism affects virtually everyone and everything. The producers coined a term to describe the toxic and dangerous effects of materialism and consumerism. The term is, “affluenza”.

This sounds like a disease, does it not?

We have certainly seen already, the tragic effects of selfish consumerism this past Friday – called “Black Friday”. It is a day when stores slash their prices to lure early Christmas shoppers.

In one Wal-Mart this past Friday, when a member of the sales staff unlocked the door, 2,000 people came rushing in so fast that they literally tore the doors off their hinges. In their mad dash to discounted items, the employee was bowled over and then literally crushed to death by the stampeding crowd.

Even after police arrived at the scene to provide medical assistance, they were pushed around by shoppers rushing past them. When they appealed for order, shoppers argued back as they continued to push their way in without as much as offering to help.

You certainly do not want to stop and pick someone up and miss getting what you have come to buy on sale, right? People are not nearly as important as some product, and you have waited since early dawn to be the first person to get it.

This is affluenza at its devilish worst.

The truth is that every person is born terminally infected with this disease. It is only one more outbreak in the epidemic of “me, myself, and I”. And it just so happens that our generation has for the most part, stopped offering for the generation now rising, antidotes marked self-sacrifice, humility, and patience.

According to a comprehensive *U.S. News & World Report* article, 26% of kids have a television in their room by the age of two. Advertisers will spend fifteen billion dollars a year targeted toward kids this age and up to about the age of twelve. Forty thousand times a year, they will be told they do not

have enough, and that what they do have is not new enough, good enough, cool enough, or fun enough.ⁱ

One article I recently read reported the results of a study that revealed that by the age of two, children recognize logos and begin asking for items by their brand name. And twenty-three billion dollars worth of toys will be purchased in one year alone in America.ⁱⁱ

If you do not think kids are really affected, one article I read estimated that currently in one year alone, children will influence more than six hundred billion dollars worth of purchases – from the snacks they eat to the vehicles their parents drive.ⁱⁱⁱ

I also came across several articles in which coalitions of parents were writing letters to advertisers asking them to stop targeting children, saying how unfair it is and how harmful it is to their children.

I wanted to write to all these parents the solution – turn the television off.

The problem is much deeper than watching television, or at least I hope so since I plan to watch a little football this afternoon. And the problem is not purchasing items from the store and, if possible, purchasing them when they are on sale.

The problem is not what we possess – the problem is what possesses us. In fact, the issue is not *possession* as much as it is *preoccupation*.

The average person happens to be preoccupied by the desire to possess one more thing – because it is the newest, the largest, the smallest, the sharpest, the coolest, the most popular, the fastest application, or the latest invention.

The original PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) documentary that coined the term “affluenza,” defined it as a “bloated, sluggish, and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses – the people next door.”^{iv}

Effects of Affluenza

The problem is that Christianity is not a vaccination for consumerism.

This is the reason James can actually be writing to Christians when he verbally scolds them, saying,

. . . You are envious and cannot obtain . . . (James 4:2)

In other words, “You envy what someone else has, but you don’t have enough money to buy it for yourself.”

James continues,

You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your selfish pleasures. (James 4:3)

My friend, the disease of affluenza does not automatically get cured at conversion.

Even more, affluenza does not just affect what you think you should have – it affects where you think you should be in life.

In John’s third letter, Diotrephes had a bad case of “self-I-tis,” and he was infecting everyone in the church every time he sneezed.

The apostle John takes all the pretense away from this church leader who had so many people bamboozled – an ancient Greek word. John simply wrote,

... Diotrephes ... loves to be first... (III John 9)

For this man, it was not a matter of possession; it was a matter of position.

John uses a word in a negative way that the apostle Paul will use in a positive way. John writes later, in verse 10,

... and [Diotrephes is] not satisfied . . .

This word is from the Greek verb “arkeo” (αρκεω), which means, “to be satisfied; literally, to be enough”.^v

Paul used the same root word when he wrote to the Philippians – and I will paraphrase his words,

I have learned to be satisfied with what I have and where I am. (Philippians 4:11 paraphrased)

Diotrephes was not satisfied with life – he had affluenza; but Paul had the cure.

Curing Affluenza

My wife, Marsha, and I had the delight of sitting around our dinner table this past Thursday with our four children, along with their maternal grandmother. We went around the table, taking turns rehearsing different settings and different people in the Bible who gave thanks.

Daniel, knowing that a decree had been signed stating that any person caught praying to anyone other than Emperor Darius would be thrown to lions, still went to his room, just as he had done before, and gave thanks to God (Daniel 6).

One leper, healed along with nine other lepers who went running to rejoice, stopped, went back, and thanked Jesus for healing him (Luke 17).

Jesus gave thanks with His disciples, even when He knew that Gethsemane and Calvary were just hours away (Matthew 26)!

And, of course, there is Paul, who was incarcerated in an underground dungeon where high profile prisoners were either starved or strangled to death, the prison where he would remain until he stood before Nero and was then executed. Turn in your Bibles to this scene in Philippi and listen in as Paul is recorded in chapter 4 with these incredible words,

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!

. . . in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

(Philippians 4:4 & 6)

Three words stand out as impossibilities – “always” (verse 4) and “everything . . . with thanksgiving” (verse 6). There are no loopholes around words like “always” and “everything” and “thanksgiving”.

Perhaps you are tempted to say, “Well, that’s why Paul was an apostle! Apostles can do this. Besides, apostles are supposed to act that way.”

This is not so. In fact, Paul will reveal to us his own personal testimony in this touching, transparent scene – and he will also provide us with the cure for affluenza.

Notice verse 11.

Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

I will come back to this in a moment, but for now, underscore the word, “learned”.

Continue to verse 12 and underscore the word “learned” in this verse as well.

I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry,

both of having abundance and suffering need.

The word “content” is the original word “autarkes” (αυταρκης), which can be translated, “an internal attitude of self-sufficiency,” or simply, “having enough”.^{vi}

Paul reveals to us nothing less than a radical way of thinking – “I have learned how to think with thanksgiving.” He reveals for us what I will call, “Three Steps to Curing Affluenza”.

Three Steps to Curing Affluenza

1. **First, accept the fact that contentment is not a personality trait – it is a discipline.**

Perhaps you have read this text in Philippians before and found yourself thinking, “I wish I were wired like the apostle Paul; I wish I had his gift of contentment.”

This is not what we have just read. Paul writes, . . . *I have learned* . . . (*Philippians 4:11*)

This is the same word that is translated “disciplined”.

In other words, “Through the long years of discipleship – of following after and learning from Christ – I have learned how to think thankfully – no matter where; no matter what.”

The first step to curing affluenza is accepting the fact that a thankful, contented spirit has nothing to do with our personality, but everything to do with a disciplined mind. Every complaint deepens the roots of discontent in our hearts; every thankful word disciplines and reshapes our perspective a little more. It is the conscious effort of a disciple to model after his Master.

One commentator included a poem that sounds so simple, but yet it expresses our discontent over things big and small.

*It was spring,
But it was summer I wanted;
The warm days,
And the great outdoors.*

*It was summer,
But it was autumn I wanted;
The colorful leaves,
And the cool, dry air.*

*It was autumn,
But it was winter I wanted;
The beautiful snow,
And the joy of the Christmas season.*

*I was a child,
But it was adulthood I wanted;
The freedom,
And the respect.*

*I was twenty,
But it was thirty I wanted;
To be independent,
And sophisticated.*

*I was middle-aged,
But it was retirement I wanted;
Freedom from commerce,
And pressure to keep up.*

*I was retired,
But it was middle age I wanted;
The presence of mind,
Without physical limitations.*

*My life is over;
And I never got what I wanted.^{vii}*

Charles Spurgeon, the eloquent pastor and teacher in England during the 1800s, wrote in his devotional regarding this particular verse these words,

We need not teach men to complain; they complain fast enough without any education. But contentment must be cultivated. Do not indulge the notion that you can be contented without learning, or learn without discipline. Contentment is never exercised naturally, but is a science to be acquired gradually. Brother, hush that murmur, natural though it be, and continue a diligent pupil in the College of Content[ment].^{viii}

First, we accept the fact that contentment is not a personality trait; it is a discipline that is learned over time.

2. **Secondly, accept the fact that contentment is not diminished by trials – it is developed.**

Notice the first part of Philippians 4:12 again. I will read it slowly and point out several words that are freighted with emotion. Paul writes,

I know how to get along with humble means...

That word “humble” appears earlier in this letter, in chapter 2, when Paul talks about the willingness of Christ to humble Himself and accept His incarnation status. He was born to humble parents, wrapped in strips of cloth, and, evidently because both Mary and Joseph were absolutely worn out and needed to sleep, placed in the feed trough in the stable. The humiliation of Christ does not get any more dramatic than this.

Paul uses the same root word in this verse for his own humiliation. This is no doubt, a reference to the cavern where he is now incarcerated, surrounded by the stench of this dank, dark prison.

One commentator suggested that Paul is also perhaps hinting at the voluntary surrender of his own rights to the early church as he is maligned, mistreated, misinterpreted, and even ignored in his incarceration.^{ix}

Contentment does not come to you because you have conquered your circumstances, but because you have learned to live with them.^x

Notice further in verse 12, Paul says,

... I also know how to live in prosperity . . .

In other words, “I know how to live with an overflowing cup.”

Has it ever occurred to you that there are more people miserable with their lives in the midst of prosperity than there are who have barely enough to survive?

Every person in this auditorium today is Exhibit A. Compared to the third world countries I have either read about or traveled through, every one of us is incredibly wealthy.

So, how contented are you?

The truth is that when we offer thanksgiving to God, we usually put a “but” at the end of the thank you.

- Thank you, Lord, for friends, but I wish I had more.
- Thank you, Lord, for my health, but could You take care of my arthritis?
- Thank you, Lord, for my house, but I really need new cabinets.

- Thank you, Lord, for my food, but I wish I had the money to eat out more often.
- Thank you, Lord, for this church, but our pastor spends too much time in one book of the Bible – can You fix him?

The truth is that we have so much – and we do not know how to handle it with contentment.

When the average Christian’s cup runs over, instead of thanking God, he complains about the size of his cup.

Paul says, in effect, “I’ve lived with an overflowing cup and an empty cup . . .”

Did you notice that Paul went from one extreme to the other in verse 12? From plenty of food to near starvation; from abundance to great need, yet, “In every circumstance,” he writes, “I have learned contentment.”

Paul was content from one extreme to the other – which means that a change in living conditions does not eliminate contentment; it provides a new environment for it to be developed.

Warren Wiersbe wrote that it is the disciplined mind that views life, not as a series of accidents, but as a series of appointments. He went on to write, “So be joyful . . . it beats being happy . . . because happiness depends on right happenings, but even when things go wrong, you can have joy.”^{xi}

This is the internal sense of satisfaction, described by the apostle Paul in this text, written by lamplight in an underground dungeon.

If you want the cure for affluenza:

- Accept the fact that contentment is not a personality trait – it is a discipline;
- Accept the fact that contentment is not diminished by difficulty – it is developed.

3. **Thirdly, accept the fact that contentment is never a solo performance – it is a duet.**

The secret that Paul is talking about can be found in verses 12-13.

I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.

Here is the secret, in verse 13.

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

This verse is normally taken out of context to apply to just about anything.

However, the context of this verse indicates that the “all things” that Paul is referring to are the extremes of life. He is saying, “I can endure the loss of my rights; I can live through the loss of food and comfort; I can survive even this imprisonment with joy – with inner satisfaction that expresses itself in terms of contentment.”

Paul is also saying, “I can handle the heights of accomplishment, success, and wealth, and plenty of food and comfortable surroundings – I can respond to this with humility, grace, and gratitude.”

In other words, “I can handle the extremes of life with balance and grace; I can be satisfied with life on either end of the spectrum.”

How?

“Through the power of Christ who lives within me.”

J. B. Phillips translates this verse, “I am ready for anything through the strength of the One who lives within me.”

This is not the power of positive thinking, by the way. This is the power of Christ-centered thinking and Christ-centered living.

This leads to true inner satisfaction – the cure for affluenza is the inner presence of the One to whom we surrender everything.

Just remember, this is a duet, not a solo.

Christ will not make you grateful, you must be willing – and He will empower your disciplined mind. Christ will not make you thankful – but He will empower your transforming heart and mind. Paul said, “I can,” meaning, “I will,” and Christ joins in and says, “I will empower you to do just that.”

Along the way we can learn – like this grey-haired apostle, who was sitting in chains, awaiting his summons before Nero, and then his execution – the secret to contentment and satisfaction.

- Contentment is not a personality trait – it is a discipline.
- Contentment is not diminished or destroyed by difficulty – it is developed.
- Contentment is never a solo – it is a duet.

Like Paul, and Daniel, and our Lord, we also can face threats, difficulties, dungeon cells, and Gethsemanes, while at the same time, give thanks.

Always ... in everything ... with thanksgiving.

What a challenge it is to say with the apostle Paul, effectively, “I am satisfied with everything and I am ready for anything, through the strength of the One to whom I have surrendered; who lives within me, empowering and enabling me to demonstrate a lifestyle that is being cured of affluenza; a life uniquely marked by satisfaction – and thanksgiving.

ⁱ Katy Kelly and Linda Kulman, “Kid Power” (Sept. 13, 2004), <http://www.unnews.com>.

ⁱⁱ “Harper’s Index,” Harper’s Magazine (Dec. 2005), p. 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kelly and Kulman.

^{iv} “Affluenza-Diagnosis,”

<http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/diag/have.html>.

^v Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 801.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 562.

^{vii} Sam Gordon, Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy (Ambassador, 2004), p. 169.

^{viii} Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Morning By Morning (Baker, 1975 ed.), p. 47.

^{ix} Ralph P. Martin, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Philippians (Eerdmans, 1987), p. 178.

^x Roy L. Laurin, Philippians: Where Life Advances (Kregel, 1987), p. 192.

^{xi} Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Joyful (Victor Books, 1978), front cover.