

Each morning on my way to work I pass a small, run down house. Judging by the looks of the house, one might conclude that its residents live at that level of existence commonly referred to as poverty-stricken. Yet, most mornings against this backdrop of poverty sits a brand new luxury car.

Much like a researcher patiently studies his lab mouse, I have, for several seasons, paid careful attention to the changing of this car. Annually, the luxury car is replaced by this year's latest model. The vehicle is always a luxury car; always new.

My researcher's mind wonders how to balance this picture of poverty with the consumption of luxury -- consumption that I suspect, in this case and many more, is fueled by the desire to buy things in pursuit of happiness, status or misplaced value.

Too many of us could point to similar examples in our own lives. We are in that same sense, very predictable, and as such very much in danger. We are pawns in the game of commercialism.

Those mega-corporate marketing machines are on to us. They have figured out what makes us tick, or rather, what makes us spend. The answer? Self-gratification.

We buy to feed self. Billions of dollars annually are spent on looking better, feeling better, smelling better, driving better, dressing better, thinking better, sleeping better, and eating better. Our conclusion: We need it, deserve it -- so we buy it. Self-indulgence is the theme of a generation lured by the whims and fancies of wealth. Looking wealthy has overtaken being wealthy as the favorite American pastime.

Although we may not see it, there is a spiritual power at work here: the power of pride. Pride is a powerful compulsion to elevate one's self to a stature of fame, wealth, status or importance. It is the spiritual birth defect by which we are all burdened. Pride has been with the men and women of this world from the opening "garden" scene. It is a force to be reckoned with, and it appears to be winning.

The Apostle Paul, writing to a self-struck crowd of well meaning people, put it this way -- "my counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness." (Galatians 5) Self focuses compulsively on our appearance. Self compulsively pursues popularity. Pride telescopes our perceptions and interpretations to a narrow but frame-filling vision of self. The compulsions of pride are the natural result of a life not counter-balanced with the Spirit of God.

God is the cosmic "reality check" putting all things in perspective. God big; me small. God good; me bad. It is pretty simple, really. Every step that I take toward making "me" famous is one more step away from God and what He intends for my life. Pride will indeed "come

before a fall.” Deep down, I believe we know there is an implication to our selfish actions, but we remain under a powerful compulsion for more that is fed by the consumer-centric flames of commercialism. “You are what you buy” is the siren song that popular culture sings to our inner soul. The end is a life of bondage, chained to the never ending spend cycle of greed and want propelled by a massive marketing machine.

Instead we are meant to “live freely” apart from the peer pressure-driven world of competitive spending; to live freely from the pressure of “being” what we drive, where we live, what we do. Cars, homes and jobs are not bad things. But the idolatry of them is. We are to own, rather than be owned. Strive to live free from the trappings of want and move to a life of calling and purpose. Ask yourself: does my context of life allow me to be free?

Excerpt from Simplify by Rod Brace – Available at Amazon.com or your favorite online bookstore.