

Threading the Needle

Spiritual Freedom in a Consumer Culture

By Dan Ofstedal – August 12, 2025 ¹

“Money, so they say,

Is the root of all evil today” —Pink Floyd, “Money”

Most of us were raised inside a story we didn't even know it—a story that says the more we have, the better life is. It's a system that thrives on the constant acquisition of goods and services, promising happiness, status, and fulfillment through material possessions. While capitalism, as an economic engine, has brought undeniable advancements and conveniences, it masterfully leverages a deep-seated human tendency: the ego's insatiable desire for "more." This relentless craving for accumulation can become an insidious addiction, subtly binding us to a cycle of wanting that *ultimately hinders psychological and spiritual freedom*.

This essay argues that the spiritual danger lies not in *having* material things, but in *identifying with them*, or in other words *being attached to them*—allowing them to dictate our inner peace and sense of self. True freedom emerges when we detach from this identification, liberating ourselves from the suffering that arises from comparison, loss, and the endless pursuit of the next acquisition.

The Ego's Endless Appetite

The allure of consumerism is potent, deeply intertwined with the ego's perpetual quest for satisfaction and validation. The ego—our constructed sense of individual self—seeks recognition, control, and security, and it is easily convinced that "more" is always better: more money, a bigger house, a newer car, the latest gadget or fashion trend. Each purchase offers a fleeting sense of accomplishment, quickly replaced by the next desire.

Capitalism, in its ingenious design, taps directly into this craving. It creates a self-perpetuating cycle of desire and supply. It constantly innovates and markets new products, convincing us that our current possessions are insufficient, outdated, or simply not enough. The success of capitalism, therefore, lies not merely in its efficiency or innovation, but in its profound understanding and manipulation of the ego's endless appetite.

For those of us raised in consumerist cultures, this influence is often invisible. We grow up *immersed* in its values, trained to equate success with accumulation and self-worth with purchasing power.

Consumerism doesn't just shape what we buy—it shapes how we see ourselves and others. We often don't

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realize how deeply controlled we are by its assumptions until we begin to question the very framework we've inherited. What feels like freedom—the ability to choose among endless products—is often a kind of subtle bondage: the belief that something outside of us will finally make us whole.

Jesus' Clear Warnings Against Material Attachment

Long before the advent of modern consumerism, Jesus' teachings offered clear warnings against these very inclinations. His words consistently guide us away from material attachment and toward a spiritual focus:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."—Matthew 6:19-21 (NIV)

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."—Luke 12:15 (NIV)

"No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money."—Matthew 6:24 (NIV)

Jesus' message is not a condemnation of wealth *per se*, but a call to reorient the heart. Possessions are not the problem; attachment is. When wealth becomes our master, our spiritual vision becomes clouded. Paul echoes this in his letter to Timothy: *"But godliness with contentment is great gain... if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that"* (1 Timothy 6:6-8), while Hebrews adds: *"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have..."* (Hebrews 13:5).

One of Jesus' most jarring metaphors, spoken to his disciples and a wealthy young man reinforces the point: *"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God"* (Mark 10:25). Again, this isn't about inherent evil of money, but about the impossibility of spiritual liberation when our sense of identity is fused with material wealth.

The Danger of Identification

These ancient warnings speak directly to our modern predicament. The real spiritual danger in consumerist culture is not *in having*, but *in being had*—in identifying with our possessions. When our identity is tied to our wealth, home, or status symbols, we become spiritually vulnerable. Our peace becomes contingent on external conditions. We suffer when we mistake the story of ourselves for the truth of ourselves. Consumerism feeds this illusion by weaving a story in which our value lies in what we own.

Consider these questions as a spiritual test:

Would you suffer if you lost valued possessions?

Would you suffer if you had to live in a more modest home, drive a basic or older car, or take the bus instead of your own vehicle?

In sum, how soon (if ever) would you regain psychological and spiritual balance if your standard of living diminished significantly?

Most of us are vulnerable to the same spiritual entrapment described in Jesus' encounter with the rich young man—not because he was wealthy, but because he couldn't imagine himself without his wealth. His sense of identity was so deeply embedded in his possessions that following Jesus—detaching from that identity—was unthinkable.

Consider that people in our modern consumerist culture have been known to commit suicide after losing their wealth. That's how strongly they identified with money and things.

Threading the Needle: Enjoying Without Identifying

So how do we practically live out Jesus's teaching in a material world? True freedom is not the ability to buy what you want. It is freedom from the need to buy, and from the suffering that arises when you cannot. It means not identifying with things, so that *whether you own them or not*, they do not hold sway over your inner state. This detachment opens the door to a profound contentment, regardless of external circumstances.

But how do we practically "thread the needle"—enjoying material blessings without being enslaved by them? The key lies in shifting from ownership to stewardship, from attachment to gratitude. We can enjoy a beautiful home while recognizing it as temporary shelter. We can appreciate fine food while understanding it as fuel for the body. We can drive a luxury car with gratitude while knowing our worth isn't diminished if we must sell it tomorrow. We can use technology gratefully while remembering it as a tool, not an identity marker.

One gauge of whether we are identified with our possessions is how generous we are with what we have. Are we willing and happy to share? Do we regularly contribute or donate to worthy causes? Do we have a zero-sum mentality around wealth, or do we gladly give, trusting that abundance flows when we hold our resources lightly? When we truly understand that possessions are temporary gifts rather than extensions of our identity, generosity becomes natural—not a sacrifice, but an expression of spiritual freedom.

This spiritual practice becomes one of constant remembering: these things serve me, but they do not define who I am. They may bring convenience, comfort, or beauty into my life, but they cannot provide lasting happiness or define my worth. When we truly internalize this understanding, we discover a remarkable freedom—we can have everything or nothing and remain equally at peace.

This shift from attachment to appreciation represents a fundamental reorientation of consciousness. It's the deeper message Jesus offered through his teachings on wealth: *not that we must live in poverty, but that we must live in freedom*. Not that material things are evil, but that identifying with them creates suffering. Not that we cannot enjoy the fruits of this world, but that we must hold them lightly, recognizing them as temporary gifts rather than permanent foundations for happiness.

Conclusion

In a society that constantly urges us to want more, the wisdom of Jesus offers a counter-narrative: that real wealth lies not in accumulation, but in freedom. The path forward requires neither the renunciation of all material goods nor their worship, but a middle way of grateful enjoyment without identification. In this balance, we discover that true prosperity is not about having more, but about needing less—not about accumulating treasures on earth, but about recognizing the treasure that is stored for us in heaven, which is right here and right now.