

More Like Mephibosheth

BY LAURA SINGLETON

Consumerism is first and foremost a culture of expectation, which can erode our ability to appreciate relationships, kindnesses, and other pleasures of life. We are trained to evaluate, inspect, and be suspicious that what is offered isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Isn't this mistrusting mindset exactly what the serpent exploited in Eden?

My words were slightly whiny, but my tone was firm: "But this coupon doesn't say it can't be used with another coupon." With "fight-or-flight" hormones kicking in, I was locked into position. Rarely do I find my defenses rising higher or my adrenalin pumping harder than in those moments of fatal confluence where my zealous frugality—not, of course, to be confused with that ugly word "greed"—meets my laser-like (and dangerously Pharisaical) focus on the "letter of the law." Whether presenting a challenged coupon, facing a cancelled airline flight, or arguing an unrecognized credit card charge, I cloak myself in worldly cynicism and enter the battle determined not to be a dupe, but to be a super-savvy, not-taken-advantage-of, "don't tread on me" brand of American consumer.

In this particular instance, the cashier, a girl less than half my age, abruptly took my coupon, and, with an "if it means that much to you, lady" look and a Gen X shrug, gave me my dollar. I walked away with a Pyrrhic victory, already repentant, and grateful that I wasn't wearing my cross necklace or "fish" bracelet or anything that might sully the name of Christ with my little performance. It was not, in other words, a Mephibosheth moment.

Oddly enough, I find my twenty-first century American consumer behavior challenged by this ancient Israelite, he of the mellifluous name and malfunctioning feet, son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul, who makes a few cameo appearances in the second book of Samuel. Mephibosheth, to begin with, knew something about gratitude. We learn of him (and the unfortunate childhood accident that crippled his feet) in 2 Samuel 4:4, but his first real turn on the stage is in 2 Samuel 9, when he receives the largesse of the newly-risen King David. Having just ascended to the throne that he was anointed by God to take, David has every prerogative (within contemporary custom) to wipe out all family connected with the previous king, Saul. Instead, honoring a vow of friendship to his late and much-beloved friend Jonathan, he grants an inheritance of land, servants, and full access to the king's table to Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth. In return, Mephibosheth gratefully (and quite understandably) grovels, "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?" (2 Samuel 9:8).

Later on, however, in an incident connected with Absalom's rebellion, David's action is less generous. Mephibosheth's servant, Ziba, attempts to curry favor with the fleeing King David, bringing him provisions and telling him the apparent lie that Mephibosheth is gleefully expecting the revolt to end in his own ascent to the throne. In response to this rather far-fetched story, David instantly grants Mephibosheth's property to Ziba (2 Samuel 16:1-4). At the time, of course, he was running for his life and wasn't in a position to grant much of anything, but apparently he took the promise quite seriously, as evidenced in his response later, after the defeat of Absalom, when he returned to Jerusalem and found an unkempt and mournful Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth said that he asked for a donkey to be saddled so he could follow David, but Ziba treacherously left him behind. He thus remained helpless to do anything but wait anxiously for his patron's return.

On the whole, the story (with Mephibosheth's "uncared-for feet" surely an arresting visual aid) rings true. David, however, acts as though he's not sure who to believe, or maybe he'd rather keep his word to Ziba than call him a liar. Instead of censuring Ziba and returning Mephibosheth's inheritance, David divides the land between them. Our mis-footed hero, however, doesn't object—quite the opposite. "Let him [Ziba] take it all, since my lord the king has arrived safely," says the loyal Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 19:30).

Where's the outrage, the demand for rights? Of course, Mephibosheth is a footnote Old Testament character, the kind whose actions are just reported upon, not assessed. Perhaps we can't be sure his behavior is meant to be an example. We can surmise, for instance, that the Levite in Judges 19 who slices up his dead concubine (or the householder in Gibeah who proffered her to the mob in the first place) isn't meant to inspire present-day emulation. Mephibosheth, however, has some pretty good company.

Consider, if you will, these words, also from the second book of Samuel: “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?” (2 Samuel 7:18). Sound like our friend Mephibosheth? It’s King David himself, the man “after God’s own heart” who, perhaps all the more because of his faults, knew how little he deserved the kindness he received. There are other examples of this kind of humility and submission from rather credible sources. Try the previously-fiery John the Baptist, who turns followers away from him and toward Jesus, quietly saying, “He must increase, and I must decrease” (John 3:30). Then there’s the confoundingly humble Syrophenician woman, who doesn’t flinch at being called a Gentile “dog” who must wait for the benefits of the Gospel, and is commended by Jesus as a result (Matthew 15:21-28). And we can’t stop without noting Jesus himself, who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (Philippians 2:6) and, along the way, told us to take the lowest place and turn the other cheek.

All of which gets me back to my argument in the supermarket, because the problem, I think, about consumerism is not just that it is a culture inspiring greed and materialism, but that it is first and foremost a culture of *expectation*. We are trained to evaluate, inspect, and be suspicious that what is offered isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. I will grant you that greed by the businesses on the other side of the equation often makes that suspicion warranted, but isn’t this mistrusting mindset exactly what the serpent exploited in Eden? For me, at least, I find that an attitude of expectation doesn’t just lead to disputes in supermarkets but, more seriously, erodes my ability to appreciate relationships, kindnesses, and other pleasures of life.

I think the problem is particularly insidious for Christians because the idea of expectation is too readily woven with spiritual-sounding language, much as the truth got twisted for Eve. In a small group meeting at a prayer retreat I once raised this thought that I felt God was showing me I needed generally to expect less and be more grateful. I was met, even in my rough-and-ready urban New England church, with raised eyebrows of solicitous concern. They pressed me with several questions. Perhaps, I sensed, they worried that I

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wasn't able to "expect great things from God" (a phrase not found in Scripture, by the way). I find, indeed, that God's Word promises me great things—the Lord's return, my own resurrection to eternity with Him, and a new heaven and a new earth, to name just a few. But a smooth connection through O'Hare Airport? It doesn't seem to be my birthright, even as a child of the King.

If we peruse the shelf at the average Christian bookstore, however, we find many titles promising a "happy life" or a "life you've dreamed of." I

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don't mean to judge the authors, virtually all of whom I know have spiritual blessings in view, but the reality is that it's too tempting to take these claims at face value. Bruce Wilkinson, for example, explicitly states in *The Prayer of Jabez* that seeking God's "blessing" has "nothing in common" with

the idea that you can "cash in" on your relationship with God for material gain.[†] That didn't, however, stop his words from being misrepresented and misunderstood in precisely that way by some readers. Our natural desires, after all, perpetually run in the direction of self-interest. The allure of having our expectations met by God is, sadly, readily mangled by worldly assumptions. Thus perverted, it too often leaves us as Christians looking around in dissatisfaction for the perfect church, the perfect job, the perfect home, even perhaps the perfect mate.

But wait—I can hear the rumblings in my own heart, so I project them to my readers—isn't there such a thing as "righteous indignation" about goods and services? Aren't we ever allowed to take a stand? Jesus clearing the temple of moneylenders is usually the illustration raised to defend this point. We have to look, though, at what his motive was. We are told his gesture fulfilled the prophecy, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17, citing Psalm 69:9). Zeal for God's house, God's purposes, is the kind of zeal God endorses. Zeal for the rights of others, especially the weak and the poor, is what you find a lot of in the Bible, starting with the prophets and continuing through Christ himself. Making sure a dangerous child's toy got recalled is the kind of consumer-minded concern that might fit this call to action. However, even in conquering the land of Canaan, the Israelites got into trouble when they forgot that their mission was to follow God's plan and get only what God *gave* to them, not take what they could get or what they deserved. (See, for example, the ugly incidents at Ai in Joshua 7.) Getting "what I deserve" is unfortunately most often the

object of the zeal I exercise in my Consumer-Reports-minded reaction to errors and inconveniences—those moments when I confuse being “right” with being “righteous.” If God were actually to treat me as I deserve, then woe is me!

Thus I return to my role model, Mephibosheth, who didn’t mind comparing himself with dogs because, after all, that’s what he was in relation to the King. It may not have the ring of “Dare to be a Daniel” or even “Be Like Mike,” but being a little “More Like Mephibosheth” feels like an appropriate aspiration.

NOTE

[†]Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers 2000), 24.

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