

The Cost of Impulse

by Dan & Kay Croy

As we talked with a group of junior high students regarding conflicts at home, it became clear that their concerns came down to basically a single issue. The anger and conflict they experienced came from their unmet expectations about life. The issue can be summed up in the phrase that comes preinstalled in every newborn: “I want what I want when I want it.”

We walked away from that experience wondering about some of our adult friends who allowed their attitudes about money to destroy their lives. They had either too little or too much of it. They talked about money constantly. They dreamed about it, fought over it, and chased after it. Their lives crumbled into dysfunctional, destructive, and disobedient patterns of behavior.

The struggle common to the students and our adult friends is what developmental psychology texts describe as the “delay of gratification.” To ensure mature behavior, a person must learn to delay gratification before reaching adulthood. The ability to control impulses is one difference between undisciplined children and mature adults.

Any grocery store checkout line offers a good venue to witness poor impulse control in action. Both sides of these crowded, narrow lanes are stocked with “impulse items.” A three-year-old wants every sugar-filled product available with no thought to the financial or physical consequences. The childish tantrums that erupt when a parent says no are a stewardship lesson for us all.

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In the same checkout lane, a mature adult would exercise the delay of gratification. The adult has the resources to buy every item on either side of the lane but chooses not to do so. The adult chooses to control the “I want what I want when I want it” impulse. However, mere human willpower and physical strength cannot always prevent us from giving in to the impulse. (Chocolate remains a struggle for us.) We need help outside ourselves to be consistent victors over the “I want what I want when I want it” drive.

The apostle Paul described the inner battle well in Romans 7:18-21. “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (vv. 18-19).

This issue goes beyond children wanting candy. This attitude expresses itself in many ways: stealing, including shoplifting and taking supplies from work; addictions such as problem gambling, eating disorders, alcoholism, and drug abuse; and selfishness that reveals itself by withholding tithes and offerings or refusing to give resources to others in need, for example.

What an incredible thought. A Holy God dares to entrust His resources to us, a sinful and selfish creation who, without His redemption and sanctification, cannot behave as wise stewards. When we surrender our will to God's will, His Spirit empowers us to delay gratification.

If any of us doubts the severity of the problems centered on finances in the home, consider a report by the U.S. Federal Reserve that the total amount of Americans' personal debt has more than doubled since 1991. Commenting on the increase of debt, Alan Levenson, chief economist for T. Rowe Price, referred to the American consumer as the "hedonist of last resort" (*Wall Street Journal*, December 24, 2002).

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34). Do we behave in such a way that non-Christians, friends, and family know where we keep our treasure?

Jesus also said, "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24). What does money represent that we cannot wait to have? Food, television, movies, clothes, sex, alcohol, gambling, gossip, drugs, position, power, recognition?

The attitude of wanting what we want when we want it is antithetical to the spirit of holiness. God desires that we all "reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants. . . . Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:13-15).

Mature Christian stewards don't throw tantrums in the checkout lane of life.

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