Holiness, health and consumption

WHAT WE PUT ON

Over the next three months, Salvationist eco-theologian MATT SEAMAN will explore the theme of holiness, health and consumption. His three articles will be entitled “What we put on” our bodies, “What we put in” our bodies and “What we do with” our bodies. In this article, Matt reflects on the products and items we put on our bodies.

“Didn’t you realise that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don’t you see that you can’t live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole works. So you can’t live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole works. So let people see God in and through your body.” 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (The Message)

“But as the One who called you is holy, you yourselves also be holy in all your conduct and manner of living. For it is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy.” 1 Peter 1:15-16 (Amplified)

While the above passages are fairly well known, when actually contemplating the scope of these verses in our lives, we find them to be all encompassing, “be holy in all your conduct and manner of living.”

I have found it very challenging to personally consider these verses and the practicality of living a life aimed towards holiness that is mindful of spiritual, social, personal and ecological issues in today’s society.

While these articles will cover a wide and disparate range of topics, when studied in more detail, there comes a realisation that there is significant interconnectedness between many areas of life, between people and the places we live in – the seemingly insignificant choices we make every day can and do impact ourselves, others and the planet.

I must also strongly emphasise that I share my reflections in a spirit of love, care and encouragement – certainly not in a spirit of judgement, legalism, or negativity. We each have our own story, our own experiences, challenges and understandings. These are personal reflections on challenges to a holy lifestyle, yet my hope is that they may be of value and encouragement to you in your journey towards wholeness and holiness with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So, let us consider these verses and how we might better live in light of the gospel and God’s call to holy lives.

Throughout the rest of this first article, let’s specifically take a closer look into “what we put on” our bodies. “What we put on” can certainly cover a wide range of areas. Items we could consider include clothing, shoes, all sorts of accessories, “beauty” products, toiletries, etc.

While the simple act of selecting an item off the store shelf or clothing rack may seem incidental, these small choices we all make can impact our own personal health, the health of our local communities and ecosystems, the wellbeing of people and ecosystems right across the world.

Personal health

There are many viewpoints on the positive and negative health impacts of many of the products and items that we put on our bodies. For example, substances that were previously used more widely have since been found to negatively impact human health. Doing some research can certainly be informative.

In addition to our personal physical health, there can also be consumer-related issues around health in emotional and psychological ways. For instance, certain feelings can emerge when seeing others, say, wearing really nice, expensive clothing. We can also see these unhealthy, negative and unhealthy feelings can include jealousy, envy and even greed. It can send us further down the path of unnecessary worry, concern over money and our ‘status’. The philosopher Alain de Botton has termed this increased worry over our position in society as “status anxiety”. He states this “story of our quest for love from the world is a … secret and shameful tale” and can be an intense issue that can have harmful consequences. These thoughts from a humanist philosophical perspective resonate strongly with scriptures such as 1 John 2:15: “Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you” (NLT).

These personal feelings can strongly and negatively impact our mental health and our attitudes – which can lead us to head in the wrong direction from living holy and whole lives in light of the gospel.

Social health

We can also see these unhealthy emotions with large in today’s society. Advertising can literally aim to increase the concern or anxiety over not having the latest item to adorn our bodies.

How might we live holy lives in the world – but yet not be enslaved to the world’s anxious and materialistic ways? How might the idea of social holiness be a part of our decision making?

As Salvationists, we have become increasingly aware of the social and economic benefits for people in other countries through our choosing of fair trade products. Collectively we have joined and supported the fight against human trafficking and modern-day slavery practices.

How are we going individually and collectively to wisely transform our everyday choices that will positively impact the physical, social and environmental health for people and communities around the world?

There are a lot of complicating factors in our consumption choices, however, a lifestyle of holiness should aim to be a blessing in as many ways as possible.

Ecological health

Regardless of culture, place or time, our lifestyles all have some impact on God’s earth. However, the choices we make in our consumption can significantly vary the amount we impact the earth.

The amount of pollution and waste in today’s society is unparalleled in human history. These levels of pollution in our air, water and soil can impact personal and social health – with many of the worst consequences falling upon the poor. How might holy lifestyles lessen negative environmental impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable?

Two thoughts come to mind: the statement “Just because we can, doesn’t mean we should”; and the encouragement by both John Wesley and William and Catherine Booth towards a life marked by simplicity and frugalness.

In closing this brief reflection of how we might aim for “being holy in all our conduct and manner of living”, here’s a thought-provoking quote from theologian Miroslav Volf. He contends that we as Christians are called to “live an alternative way of life within the political, ethnic, religious, and cultural institutions of the larger society.”

How might we as Salvationists live in alternative ways that point to the gospel of God’s love for all of creation?

Holiness involves transformation. May we continue to wisely transform our everyday lifestyles to care for ourselves, to show love to all creation and to bring glory to God!