

AFFLUENZA: DIAGNOSIS AND CURE FOR THIS SPIRITUAL DISEASE
Deuteronomy 8:10-14

Living God's Word—A Walk Through The Bible
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These past few years, our world has become more conscious of the international threat of influenza and diseases. The fact that people travel so much throughout the world greatly increases the possibility of some disease being transmitted to a whole different country or city.

The SARS epidemic a few years ago did spread from Asia to Toronto and several others places. As a result the tourism industry was devastated in those places. Worries over deadly illnesses like SARS, along different strains of flu like bird flu, get the attention of the whole world. We are definitely concerned today about influenza and communicable diseases.

Yet there is also a very serious spiritual virus that is spreading and affecting many people today—and that is what we can term affluenza. In fact, there was a book written several years ago with that title, "*Affluenza*." It talks about the underlying impact and affect our affluent lives, and things like materialism, has on our entire society.

These authors talk about how shopping centers and internet sales have taken the place of churches as symbols of cultural values. They talk about how American credit card indebtedness tripled in the 1990's and 2,000's. The really sad thing, however, is that as we now have so much stuff, our lives have often been overtaken by paying for, maintaining and caring for all these possessions...rather than people.

As we continue reading through the Old Testament and following the journey of the Children of Israel, we now see how these people have been able to win some battles, how they have been able to capture some plunder from their conquests. They have now been able to gather cattle, gold, silver and other possessions from their war victories.

As we get into Deuteronomy; as the Children of Israel are now ready to enter into the Promised Land of Canaan, Moses preaches a sermon to these people telling them to remember how God has cared for them all these years; to remember how God fed them with bread like manna.

Upon entering into this Promised Land, this land flowing with milk and honey, Moses is reminding them to keep God's commands. He is reminding them to remember that God is the one who is providing all this land for them filled with pools of water, fig trees, olives and honey, and where they can dig copper out of the hills.

Moses says these words in Deuteronomy 8:10-14... Moses warns the people that it is easy to get so used their blessings that they will forget who gave them in the first place. It is so easy to become filled with pride and believe that they somehow have earned these things, have made these blessings happen, or even somehow deserve them because they are such good people.

In repeating the Ten Commandments to the people in Deuteronomy 5; in reminding them of God's law Moses commands them again, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" He knew that by entering into this Promised Land that they were coming into a land filled with idolatry and immorality. They needed to keep God at the center or they would easily turn away from him.

Rick Warren is one who says that the people who often lead the church in mission and outreach are the new believers, the new people who are excited in their faith. These people are ones who want everyone to know the love of Jesus in their hearts. They are people who can't get enough of Bible learning, who want to worship and praise God with all their being.

Yet Rick Warren also says that it is those of us who have been a Christian for many years, have been a member of a church for five years or more, it is people like us in every denomination who often get very complacent in our faith. We often lose the enthusiasm we may have once had back when our faith was coming alive or really growing in us.

We may then easily allow the church to become more like a country club, simply a social organization we belong to. With that, long term church members can easily become more concerned with our own comfort. Our concerns often become more centered on what we like, rather than on thinking about how we want to do everything we can to reach out to others. It is easy, in whatever land we live in, to focus on us, on our group, rather than on God.

In living in this land—our nation and area—flowing with milk and honey we also may face this virus of affluenza; we may face this challenge that Moses laid out for the Children of Israel. In other words, it is so easy to forget who brought us to this life, who blessed us with our gifts and talents, who has provided the opportunities and abundance in our land.

Lewis Lapham in his book, "*Money And Class In America*," says that money is often seen among Americans as the commodity which opens the doors to feelings and experiences. It has become for many the stuff that often allows people to choose to play at being their own gods, where they can do just about anything they wish.

Yet at the same time Lapham asserts that no matter what our income, a depressing number of Americans basically believe that if they only had twice as much money and/or net worth than they presently have, then they would inherit the estate of true happiness.

This doubling principle seems to be imbedded in many today. People of all income brackets say that if only they could accumulate twice as many assets, then they would ascend the promised land of contentment. They could then quit their jobs and stop pandering to the whim of their boss.

If only they did not have to keep up appearances, to play the game of lying or saying things they don't mean to get ahead. If only they did not feel so small when they think about how much money they need or deserve. Then they would be free to reach all their desires.

It is precisely this belief that pushes many into the corners of envy and rage. They want to be transformed into gods. Lapham asserts that the characteristics of a rich person, or of a rich nation, is to think that they never have enough of anything. Not enough love, time, houses, dinner invitations, designer clothes, vacation time, grown up toys.

Americans therefore can never quite achieve the American dream, they never believe they have enough. As a result so many go through life with what Lapham calls “*a low grade fever of discontent*.” They feel they have been cheated when the wealth was given out to people; if they could only find a way to double their income and net worth, then life would be heavenly.

This low grade fever of discontent, of course, also makes it next to impossible for many Americans to give very much away, to be generous stewards. Just like the Children of Israel wandering in the wilderness and finding manna on the ground each morning, so many want to hoard what they have. Yet just like the Israelites they find the next day that it is spoiled.

1Timothy 6:17-19 says these very important words... The only true hope and life is found in trusting in God with all our being; our only hope is serving God and being generous with all our blessings. It is true that a life centered in God’s love, whether rich or poor, that person will find a joy and life that is beyond our understanding.

Moses knew the challenges the Children of Israel would face as they got settled into this new land flowing with milk and honey. He knew how easy it is to become complacent and turn in on oneself. He knew the temptation would be great to turn from God, to expect life to revolve around them, to go through the ritual of worship but not commit one’s whole life to God.

In our land today flowing with milk and honey these same realities are getting a firmer grip on people each day. Our real god has become us and our needs, and this affluenza has spread to us a virus that permeates much of life. With us and our needs as god, we are never content.

With us and our needs as god, churches become more centered on pleasing us, than on centering their mission and passion on doing whatever they can to bring Jesus to others. With us as our god, we focus more on what we want God to do for us, rather than on what mission and love we can give to others.

With us as our god the rich get richer and the poor get poorer—and some actually rationalize that they deserve more because they are such “good” people. With us as our god, we easily judge others and yet are never really happy.

The only cure, my friends, is the cure that Moses proclaimed long ago. It is only as we trust in God above all gods; it is only as we dedicate our whole lives to him by faith and commitment; it is only as we worship and praise God from the depth of our hearts that we will know the true joy and fulfillment of life.

It is only as we remember how God has led us, how all we have are gifts of his gracious love; it is only then that our response will be to dedicate a tithe, a growing percentage, to God’s mission.

It is true that a life committed to Jesus in faith, overflowing with gratitude and giving, is the only cure for the affluenza virus today.