Season of Creation Mass: Frugality

There's a difference between being *cheap* and being *frugal*. It can be difficult to explain exactly what that difference is because, what one person considers being *frugal*, another person might call simply being *cheap*. But it's important for us to know the distinction, because most people would rather be called *frugal* than to be called *cheap*.

To help us come to some kind of consensus on the *frugal* / *cheap* debate, there was a survey given earlier this year that asked the questions *Is it frugal?* or *Is it cheap?* about several common habits. For the purpose of learning which habits people consider to be *frugal*, and those which people consider to be *cheap*.[1]

On the one hand, there was large consensus that seeking out deals and using coupons when making a purchase is: being *frugal* (72%). On the other hand, there was similar large consensus that never leaving a tip at a restaurant is: being *cheap* (75%). Outside of those two habits, the consensus wasn't as clear.

How about: regularly checking the home thermostat? It was closer, but most people consider that being *frugal* (62%). How about: reusing tea bags or coffee filters? I don't drink tea or coffee, so I'm not sure about this myself. Again, it was closer, but most people consider that being *cheap* (60%).

Finally how about: extending the use of a soap bottle by diluting it with water. (I just did this last week, so be careful how you answer…) That one, it turns out, was evenly split. Half the people consider that being *frugal*, and half consider that being *cheap* (51%-49%).

Perhaps you recognize some of these or similar habits in yourself or a loved one. Like you, I have several of my own quirky habits that I like to think of as being *frugal*. But the difference between being *frugal* and being *cheap* can't quite be measured by a survey, because a survey can't capture what's in our hearts. And behind every action, it's what lies in our hearts that makes the difference between being *frugal* and being *cheap*.

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The Parable of the Rich Fool (from today's Gospel) shows us what it looks like to be *cheap*, that is, to be greedy.[2] His sole aim was to gather as many of God's gifts as he could – treasures meant for all people – and to store them up for *himself*.[3] In just three verses, he found a way to use the words 'I', 'my', and 'myself' an astonishing ten times![4] He is rightly called a fool because, being blind to anything or anyone outside himself, he cannot see the greater riches that God has waiting for him beyond his possessions.[5]

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Saint Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, offers us an antidote to the Rich Fool: one who stores up treasures – not for *himself* – but for *others*. In the 6th century, Benedict wrote a *Rule* to guide all aspects of living in a monastic community, which is still being used by religious men and women today. The *Rule* has 73 chapters that cover every aspect of life: when and how to pray, work, eat, sleep, etc. The *Rule* is practical in that it helps a group of men or women live in common, but its deeper purpose is summed up in one phrase: "that souls might be saved."[6]

Chapter 31 of the *Rule* introduces us to the Cellarer: the one who is in charge of all the monastery's goods, which are stored in the cellar. Unlike the Rich Fool, the Cellarer is "a wise person."[7] The Cellarer is neither stingy nor wasteful.[8] Far from being *cheap*, the Cellarer is

frugal. In one of the *Rule*'s more memorable lines, Benedict tells us that the Cellarer treats the monastery's pots "and all its goods as if they were the holy bowls of the altar."[9]

Why does the Cellarer take such good care of even the most common objects? Simply, it's so that these gifts – these treasures – given to us by God are available to those who truly need them. To help all people know about God's love for them. Most especially, the Cellarer (unlike the Rich Fool) stores up the goods of the monastery so that they are ready to be given to: "the sick, the children, the guests and the poor, knowing without any doubt that he [or she] will have to give an account for all these on judgment day."[10] For this reason, Benedict tells us that, "Frugality shall be maintained in all cases."[11]

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You see, being *frugal* is not as much about saving up resources, as it is about making sure that the gifts God gives to all of us are treated as gifts. That they are not horded or wasted, but are truly given to all. To help all people have the chance to know and experience God's love. So that all souls might be saved.

Furthermore, being *frugal* shapes our hearts to get better at hearing (as Saint Paul wrote to the Romans) when "creation is groaning."[12] When we turn down the thermostat; when we reuse tea bags and coffee filters; when we extend the life of a bottle of soap: we aren't simply saving money or resources. We're responding to the groaning we hear from creation. Nature groans when our industries extract their toll. Our brothers and sisters groan when they don't share in the comforts of heat, food, and health care. Being *frugal* helps our hearts get better at hearing that groaning and then asking the question, "Am I rich in what matters to God?"[13]

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My brothers and sisters, this isn't an empty groaning we hear. Our *faith* tells us that Jesus Christ entered into our suffering and He Himself groaned and cried out from the Cross.[14]

Our *hope* tells us that this groaning leads to the glory of Redemption and Resurrection for all of

creation.[15] And our *love* tells us that we don't have to wait for Judgment Day. That through our

loving care for all of creation, we begin to share – and to help all people and all creation share –

in God's glory, even now![16]

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[1] Slickdeals Survey, June 2018
[2] Luke 12:15
[3] Luke 12:21
[4] Luke 12:17-19
[5] Luke 12:20-21
[6] *Rule of Benedict* 41.5
[7] *RB* 31.1
[8] *RB* 39.10
[9] *RB* 39.10
[10] *RB* 31.9
[11] *RB* 39.10
[12] Romans 8:22
[13] Luke 12:21
[14] Matthew 27:46, 50
[15] Romans 8:18
[16] Romans 8:21-22