

"That's all I need..."

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Thoughts on Romans 12 v2:

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world..."



Much too regularly I cut the label from my latest purchase, pop it on a hanger and think guiltily, "Right – that really has to be it now. I have everything I need." I blame it on my love of change. I'm a fickle person who also happens to listen far too keenly to the voices of fashion. But my guilty secret remains: for as long as I've been earning, I've been shopping.

I enjoy a good mooch round the shops. It's one of the few activities a girl can do on her own these days and feel perfectly safe. It's fun to see what the shops are offering: the goods are crisp and immaculate, untouched and full of promise.

From the moment that my eyes first alight upon that special item, I'm convinced that not only was it so entirely designed with me in mind that it would almost be a sin not to buy it, but also that it would vastly improve my life. Simple objects seem to boast

promises of exciting new realms of pleasure and satisfaction. A pair of boots will make my legs look longer; they'll make me stride with the confidence of a supermodel and I'll feel great about myself. A cute spotty teapot has the power to transform my kitchen; I picture myself standing at the worktop in the sunshine, smiling with pleasure as I pour my morning tea. It'll do another job too: those quirky rainbow spots will announce to everyone who comes round, "The person who chose that spotty teapot must be quite a character".

Whatever the thing is that catches my eye, you can bet it's soon enveloped in plastic and dangling from my hand.

Why do I find the act of purchasing so addictive? In her book, *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* Sophie Kinsella describes the feeling perfectly:

"That instant when your fingers curl round the handles of a shiny, uncreased bag – and all the gorgeous new things inside it become yours...It's like going hungry for days, then cramming your mouth full of warm buttered toast."

I admit it: I have a bit of a thing for things. The clever part is, you'd never know I had this shopping habit. Go on, have a peek around my trendily-minimal home. You won't even find a secret closet packed full of knick-knacks like the one *Friends'* Monica has.

I'll come clean. The shameful truth is that the local charity shops regularly benefit from my desire for the new. Gone off the furry pink cushion covers that I just had to have only a month after I

bought them? No problem; I'll simply pop them into town (next time I go shopping) so that they can benefit someone else.

Actually, when you look at it like that, aren't I just doing that 'selling-and-giving-to-the-poor' thing that Jesus advocated? Look at it that way and it's actually no big deal. After all, I've got the money, I'm not doing anyone any harm and more importantly, my home and wardrobe are benefitting from regular makeovers. A change really is as good as rest, especially when it comes to the aforementioned *Barbie* cushion covers. (It took a surprisingly long time for me to realise that they didn't look 'wittily ironic' and that they'd look a whole lot better in the five year olds' bedroom they were intended for). Another perk of getting rid of stuff is the amazing feeling you get when you leave those bin bags of unwanted clutter at the charity shop: that sense of being somehow 'purged' is a kick that's oddly addictive.

I've spent years trapped in these repeated cycles of shop-donate-shop. My spending habits have been as unhealthy as the dieter who eats nothing but soup for a week then rewards herself by popping into the bakers for a custard tart binge. I dread to think how many rooms could have been fully (and beautifully – if you happen to like pink) furnished over the years using my cast-offs. In fact, I have a nightmare image of me arriving in Heaven, where God's stood waiting for me with a big fat *Next Directory*-type scrapbook full of my purchases under His arm, it's pages a shaming record of my wastefulness.

Odd to think that for someone who considers herself to have been a Christian since childhood, I've only just now hit a problem with all this. No, the problem's not that I've reached the limit on my credit card or even that I've run out of things to want. On the contrary, it seems that as long as those clever designers can keep coming up with the latest seasons' stuff in the latest seasons' shades, I can keep coming up with the latest seasons' earnings, no problem at all.

No, the trouble is that my conscience has kicked-in in a big way. Aided by peskily-challenging *Greenbelt* talks by Tony Campolo on the subject of Poverty, I've found myself convicted that whole chunks of my lifestyle aren't doing anyone any favours (with the possible exception of Mrs *E-Bay*).

I've become brutally aware that if I'm going to progress in my faith, it's not only my spending habits that need to change but my whole way of thinking. I need to ask myself some serious questions. How fragile is my sense of self-worth that I feel the need for a teapot to communicate that I'm a fun person? And just how healthy is it to look for excitement and satisfaction at a shopping centre of all places?

I'm aware that I'm letting the world shout it's messages at me so loudly that I can't hear myself think. Actually, it's probably closer to the truth to say that I'm so happy to let the world tell me what's-what, that I don't feel the need to think for myself at all. Much easier that way. The thoughts that occupy my mind? Well, I certainly need to be thinner but at the same time I should be curvier. My teeth could be whiter and my skin should definitely be browner. Just who is it that I'm trying to be? Jordan, Britney, Belle or *Barbie*... you can take your pick.

Oh, and at some point before long I should probably be a cookie-baking, finger-painting mum by day, and a lace-wearing fox for my husband by night. But all that's only after I've made my mark as a successful suit-wearing, laptop-tapping career girl. Oh, and I definitely need more stuff, cooler stuff, the latest stuff and a bigger house to keep all that stuff in.

Who on earth (or wherever else for that matter) is behind this voice I'm so busy listening to anyway? Who was it decided that last month's 'must-have' furry gilet hanging in my wardrobe is now last season's has-been? Who decides when brunette becomes the new blonde, brown the new black? Who is it telling me my house should be bigger, more stylish and have wall-to-wall-fully-automatic-fitted-everything? And more importantly, why-ever do I buy into all this rubbish?

I listen to the world's ideas and accept them readily without any question. At the same time that I'm happily gulping down any old empty promise that the world chooses to make, I'm endlessly questioning and doubting the truth of God's promise that He loves me just as I am.

In the early days of my faith, I'll admit that it was tricky to spot the differences that Christianity made to my life. You might have seen the fish sticker on my car or noticed that I didn't read my horoscope. But these days, I'm having uncomfortable thoughts about what I actually need to do to properly live out this faith thing. You can see how this sort of thinking might not sit too comfortably with the whole mindless-consumption thing.

Just in case you can't, I'll explain myself a bit. I'm thinking along these lines: God loves me, I love Him. In order to love Him, I need to love others. In order to love others, I need to show that love. And I'm not showing that love, if, while my mind is caught up with the business of spotty teapots, fluffy cushions and wondering how to walk like a supermodel, a whole lot of people in the world are going very hungry.

So where does this leave me? Well, mainly wondering what I'm going to do for fun now the shops are off limits.

To be honest, I'm left feeling slightly panicked: have I really drawn a line under this episode of 'stuff-addiction'? Will I be able to pull this resolution off? I admit I feel a bit like a lifelong smoker who's just vowed to give up for good. And seriously, what am I going to do for kicks now retail-therapy is off the menu?

I just know it's not going to be easy to shut out those worldly voices. I'll need to work hard to reject all those nonsense lies. I'll need to be really strong not to succumb to the temptation to make that life-changing egg cup mine. But I'm hoping it's going to be well worth it.

Because maybe for once I'll be able to have a go at that crazy 'giving money away' idea of Jesus'. Perhaps I'll even think up some better ways to spend the time I used to waste wandering round the shops.

And above all, I'm hoping that if I do manage to tune out the noise of the world, I'll be able to better hear that better voice speaking to me. Whispering those words of truth and freedom that I didn't realise I was thirsting for. Telling me that I'm loved and that knowledge of that love is all I've really needed all along.