



Foreword by Emily P. Freeman



FINDING HOLY



in the SUBURBS

Living Faithfully in the Land of Too Much



ASHLEY HALES



Taken from *Finding Holy in the Suburbs* by Ashley Hales.
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Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com

Worshipping Granite Countertops

CONSUMERISM

*Because our consumption can take us
anywhere, we are nowhere in particular.*

WILLIAM T. CAVANAUGH, *BEING CONSUMED*

SHORTLY AFTER WE MOVED, I walked into my new suburban Target and felt like I was stuck in a maze. This reiteration of my favorite place to drool over trendy home decor, clothes, and office supplies was the flip-flop layout from my Salt Lake City Target. It was the same place, but it was completely different. For weeks, I kept pushing my cart toward the automotive supplies in the back corner when I thought I was headed to the checkout line. Eventually, I learned a new way through this familiar but not-quite-the-same space, and my new layout became the default. In the turmoil of moving, Target was still a welcome point of reference.

Target offered rest. It provided a feeling of home: I could imagine myself back in Salt Lake City with a mountainscape outside rather than more big-box buildings. Beyond that, temporally, there was a texture of all the accumulated years of red shopping carts, children running to climb the balls outside of the store, and the allure of dollar bins. In Target, I could belong to a tribe of tired mothers searching for relief.

I'd wandered Target's aisles for years with strollers, and single carts, and even the ones that fit three kids with my fourth strapped on me.

(Those years are blurry.) I'd pushed my oldest child as a toddler in a fold-up umbrella stroller in the suburbs of San Diego when we needed free air conditioning and something to do. I'd had impromptu dance parties with my kids in the aisles of my Salt Lake City Target. After tantrums that had gotten out of hand, I'd even abandoned carts in Target, a child under each arm like footballs, while my older children stomped and glared because we were leaving. (That was fun. I ignored the staring customers.)

Target shopping trips had become an unthinking liturgy—what I did to bide the time or to reward myself for the hard work of parenting, while also feeling rather self-righteous since I could productively get errands done too. I could buy whatever struck my fancy (or at least imagine doing so) while sipping my Starbucks latte.

Each time I ventured into Target, I could be assured of air conditioning, my favorite clothes on sale, and overhead lighting that didn't make me want to run for the hills.

I could imagine myself in their home displays, how the art supplies would make me a crafty mom, how if I bought that dish soap we'd finally keep our kitchen clean and tidy, how I'd drink more water when I had the new glass water bottle, how I'd finally find the right concealer to make me look awake and fresh, and how the right hair product would give me beachy waves. I'd dream about how I could totally rock fringe booties and gladiator sandals, especially when they were on clearance.

A shopping trip to Target held out the adrenaline rush of a good deal, the mingling of caffeine with the dopamine hit when we buy something, the pleasure of comfort, and the hope of transformation (at least regarding new footwear). If my children decided my Target deal-finding mission was not their jam for the day, I could (usually) bribe them with snacks, goodies from the dollar bin, or an impromptu lunch at the adjoining Pizza Hut. At Target I could morph into "fun mom": "Sure you can have Goldfish or Pokémon cards! And sure, let's grab new

swim goggles and new markers, as long as Mama can look at the boho chic rugs, gold office supplies, and comb through the sale racks!”

I was multitasking and being productive—doing the errands, taking a break, buying a coffee, indulging my children a little. We all need a little retail therapy, right? Right?

GOLDEN CALVES

Those of us who are people of faith tend to worship our place alongside God. Sure, we love Jesus, but in the suburbs we'd like our slice of the American dream too. We want our Bible studies alongside our Target splurges. It's not wrong to appreciate beauty, to buy things, or want our homes to be lovely. Shopping itself isn't bad, but our repeated habits help to form our loves. When I buy dark chocolate or new throw pillows when I'm feeling lonely, sad, or angry, I only mask my soul hunger with a suburban fast-food fix. Since the Garden of Eden, and just like the prodigal son, we leave home to seek it elsewhere—even in new home decor or packed schedules. When I go to Target to solve my locational and existential homesickness, it will never work. Because Target can never sate my hungers.

We keep shopping, buying, and consuming because we are desperate to be filled without it seeming like joy and happiness always find a way to leak out. We crave belonging and rootedness. We want a home. God designed us for himself; we are restless until we rest in God, as Augustine said.

But the more I use stuff to fill up my hungers, the more distance I put between God and myself. And as I continue to fill up my infinite hungers with finite things (when I run through the Starbucks drive-through as an answer to my weariness or feeling out of place), these finite things not only leave me hungry but also create ways of being—or liturgies—that move me away from God.

Soon I'm unthinkingly buying note cards in the dollar bins at Target every time I feel lonely. I buy chocolate when I'm depressed or needy.

I buy facial masks because I fear the unknown of aging. I buy notebooks to keep our family organized, but more than that, to maintain a semblance of control.

Our eyes drift to the new, the flashy, the trendy, just like Eve's eyes lit up before she took the fruit God told her not to eat; just like the younger son was tantalized by the far-off country. We leave the goodness of God and our first home, and set up our tents elsewhere, just like God's people.



After God's people had been exiled from the Garden, they grew in number and influence, yet were finally taken as slaves in Egypt. After hundreds of years of slavery, God delivered his people through miracles. As they wander the desert as a consequence for their disobedience, God gives them instructions about how to set up the tabernacle, a movable space to worship God living among them.

Between instructions for the tabernacle's construction and its execution, Moses is at the top of Mount Sinai receiving God's law for forty days. Aaron, his brother, is in the camp below with the people. They get impatient. They grumble. They gather around Aaron, tell him to get up and ask him to "make us gods who shall go before us" (Exodus 32:1). In their disdain, their leader becomes "*this* Moses," "*the man* who brought us out from Egypt," and Aaron (perhaps sheepishly, or as their puppet, or just unsure what to do) instructs the people to take off their gold earrings. He then fashions their gold into a calf. They proclaim, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out to the land of Egypt!" (Exodus 32:4). And Aaron, perhaps as a way to stay true to God, sets up an altar next to the calf, and proclaims the next day a feast to the Lord.

God's people exchange the glory of the living and true God with the earrings that were in their ears mere hours before. Israel attributes their salvation to the gold in their ears. The statue of a calf seems primitive, but we are no different.

Salvation, in its general sense, connotes “preservation from destruction, ruin, loss or calamity.” Tell me if you do not use your house, your 401(k), your savings account, your job, and your marriage as bulwarks to push off ruin, loss, and calamity. It is not that institutions or buildings are bad things. These stabilizing features of our lives, though, easily morph into salvific things. They also shine and shimmer in the ear. They are not the things that deliver us.

But when objects and relationships move from lovely things into salvific things, we do exactly the same as God’s people lost in the wilderness. Ask yourself, *Where do I run when I experience negative emotions*—is it food, a listening ear, shopping, drinks, exercise? Or do we first bring our fear, angst, and impatience to a God who can actually do something about it? When we get antsy waiting on God and his word, we ask our stuff to save us.

We want God *and* the stuff we worship alongside God.

We may still do all the right things in the suburbs: we show up to church. We give money away. We like the gods of our own hands right next to the altar of the Lord. Yet worship is never simply what we do with our Sunday mornings: it is a posture, an attitude, and a heart orientation toward that which holds our affections.

When we get antsy waiting on God and his word, we ask our stuff to save us.

When Aaron set up the altar next to the calf, he thought the people could have it all. They could use a golden calf to make ritual offerings and perform sexual rites just like other nations. But as John L. Mackay notes in his commentary on this passage, “God’s people are not freed so that they may go their own way. They are saved so that they may realise the purposes of God.” We are saved for God, not for ourselves. Freedom is not freedom *from* all constraints on an individual: freedom is abundant life *in Christ for* others.

We worship what saves us. We may not worship gold earrings, but we feel better about ourselves when we invite others over to admire

our new kitchen renovation or bathroom remodel or our photos from our cruise. This God-as-gold comes in smaller suburban packages too: we share our Target haul, our thrift-store deals, and how buying a cute set of yellow throw pillows on sale at HomeGoods literally turned our day around (ask me how I know). We're impatient. We seek the hit of retail therapy to replace the deep, abiding sense of belonging with the God of the universe. Consumerism isn't just buying material things we need, rather, "consumerism is a type of spirituality." That is why Moses reacts so strongly.

This is why it feels so appropriate—like the end of a Greek play where all is set right—that after Moses sees what's happened he not only breaks the tablets of God's law in anger but also burns the golden calf, turns it into powder, and makes the people drink it. It's as if Moses says, in making their golden calf green juice, "Let me show you what your gods are made of: they are but dust, particles that pass through your stomach and are turned into excrement. They can never feed and nourish you. They move through your gut and do not embolden or empower you. They do not slake your thirst. They do not meet your hunger. All that gods of gold are good for is to be turned into waste."

When we try to feed ourselves with the shiny packaging of our things, we go hungry every time. We're left malnourished and empty and longing for the next thing to scratch an internal itch.

LITURGIES OF CONSUMERISM

Retail therapy gives us the thrill of the hunt and a hit of dopamine (the love hormone) as we anticipate a purchase, but it cannot feed our hungers. We know this. But we return each time, hoping it will. We buy and we window shop because we aren't captivated by a better way, a better story. The process of finding holy in the suburbs is not necessarily eschewing Target runs, but it starts by waking up to our hungers in the first place.

Our hunger is human: we want to be filled. We desire abundance and satiety. We want to belong to a people and a place.

In the suburbs we settle for consumerism to answer our hunger to be whole. “There is an intimate and indissoluble link between suburbia and buying,” writes Roger Silverstone. Buying has become our favorite form of worship.

We stuff ourselves with stuff, thinking more, bigger, and better will make us feel less empty or alone.

In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith writes of

the mall as a religious space. In this religious space, we are motivated by our felt needs: “we come looking, not sure what for, but expectant, knowing that what we need must be here.” In this worshipful space of the mall, we take off our earrings and hope they turn into gods who save—whether that’s to stave off boredom, or to feel as if we are creating a home or a body that is beautiful and inviting, or to get a rush from whatever is new, novel, and numbs our ache when all is not right with the world. We ask what we buy to save us.

Buying has become our favorite form of worship.

When we have our “newfound holy object in hand, we proceed to the altar, which is the consummation of worship. . . . This is a religion of transaction, of exchange and communion. . . . And so we make our sacrifice, leave our donation, but in return receive something with solidity that is wrapped in the colors and symbols of the saints and the season.” Buying is our suburban form of worship, whether it’s at the mall or shopping from our phones.

As the Israelites grew impatient for God, they filled up their time with worship, but it was something shiny and new, something they could see and touch. The golden god wasn’t intended as a replacement for God, it was a bookmark for him until he came back. But when we bookmark things in God’s place—from our children to our spouses, from our God-given work to our volunteering or our stuff—these good gifts from God are transformed into shiny objects we worship.

They become dust destined for the toilet; we're just too enamored by the sheen to realize it.

When our lives are based on the story of the marketplace, we do not move toward others (God or neighbor). Because we're fighting to acquire (stuff, reputation, you name it), we lose out on living from a deep storehouse of belovedness. Our relationships are ruled by liturgies of transaction. When he gives, I repay. When a relationship becomes boring like last year's styles, we throw out the old and begin anew (or at least move that relationship to the back of the closet). We value people for what they do for us rather than as fellow human beings created to enjoy God and made in his image.

Then, God's church is less family—where a person is joyful, vulnerable, annoyed, and hurt, but deeply committed to working things out—and more about which brand appeals to my sensibilities the most. If we treat God's church like check boxes of our personal preferences, how can we expect our deep hungers to be met? The church is not a check box. It is God's people on mission together. What is more exciting and fulfilling than that?



We are formed by our daily habits. What, how, when, from where, and how much we purchase aren't just morally neutral consumer choices defined by the best deal. They actually shape our hearts. They tell us who and what we worship. When I wake in the morning, pour myself a cup of fancy coffee on my granite countertop, shove prepackaged food into lunch boxes, and pour the latest cereal out for my children, I'm formed by what and how I buy. What I value is often ease over justice: I have no connection to my food or coffee. I neglect to discover the working conditions of the coffee bean workers if I don't buy fair-trade. I value quantity over quality all in an effort to save time or money. I functionally center myself over the stories and even livelihoods of others by how I buy and how I spend my time.

Yet, at the same time, I realize many people aren't able to make the same choices with their money. They survive, and coffee (let alone granite countertops) is a luxury. But if you or I have been given forms of economic or locational privilege, do we use it to make our lives more comfortable, or do we use our privilege for others?

Along with Tish Harrison Warren, we must ask the hard question, What if “my daily practices [are] malforming me, making me less alive, less human, less able to give and receive love throughout my day”? What if, like golden earrings and golden calves, I'm expecting my granite countertops to save me?

The granite countertops of course are not the thing, and it's easy to replace our desire for nice things with more “acceptable” forms of affection: love, service, justice, and love for our children. The question is, what is underneath the surface? If I decide to be morally upright and change my thinking about my pretty kitchen but do not interrogate the habits of my heart, I am no better off. It is both about countertops and not about countertops at all. Am I concerned about fitting into a story of affluence? Do I feel entitled to a certain level of privilege and comfort? What has captured my imagination: my countertops or the kingdom of God?

By elevating the thing itself to godlike heights, we lose the goodness of the original. When we require a prince to rescue us, we spoil the goodness of actual husbands. When we serve our jobs, our children's wishes, or our new granite countertops, the things are destined to turn to dust in our hands. Though it smarts and feels like death, the crumbling is a gift.

Carol Ann Duffy writes her poem “Mrs. Midas” from the perspective of the woman married to King Midas (the man who wished for everything he touched to be turned to gold). After he comes home with his wish granted, Mrs. Midas makes him sleep in the spare bedroom, afraid for her life, yet reflects on their separation:

You see, we were passionate then,
 in those halcyon days: unwrapping each other, rapidly,
 like presents, fast food. But now I feared his honeyed
 embrace,
 the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.

Our desires easily ruin the thing itself when the object of our desires moves from its proper place. After King Midas has moved out, delirious with gold and hearing the song of Pan in the woods, his wife, alone, stops dead in her tracks seeing a bowl of apples. The poem ends: “I miss most / even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch.” When apples have turned to gold, they lose what they’re meant for. When people are golden objects, we lose connection. Likewise, when we require our people and our things to stand in God’s place, we lose the goodness of the original.

Our liturgies of consumerism do more than ruin God’s blessings. They are poor substitutes for belonging. When we buy, we’re buying the dreams associated with the nouns we say we want. We buy the feeling and the promise. As Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska note, “It is not objects that people really desire, but their lush coating of images and dreams. . . . It is never the object which is consumed—instead it is the relationship between us and the object of desire.” Flat abs will never satisfy. Neither will the luxury vehicle, more square footage, perfectly behaved children, or that new pair of shoes. Your children’s academic accolades and athletic prowess will never be enough. They all demand more to keep the dream alive. Your vacations or investments or marital bliss will fail and falter.

When we keep purchasing, keep consuming, and keep envying and coveting, we are pining for what the objects represent: peace, ease, meaning, beauty, stability, adventure, knowledge, renown, connection, and esteem. Such heavyweight abstract ideas cannot be saddled to the latest purchase. Granite countertops are a poor substitute for peace, beauty, and belonging.

Like God's people, we lose sight of what's really going on under the surface. If we are wrapped up in God's story, we already have belonging. But—perhaps especially in suburbia—we continue to buy our dreams because we have the resources and privilege to do so. We equate security with a number in the bank or on the scale. We think freedom is found in what we drive or where we live. Rest is how, where, and when we vacation. Peace is defined by the absence of responsibility. All our lives are oriented toward the endless pursuit of leisure in the suburbs, and we keep hustling and buying instead of accepting the gift of rest we already have in a God who has every resource at his disposal.

Who knew that drinking the dust of our idols is actually a gift?

But there is good news. There is a better story. First, always first, we must feel how it feels to have bare ears. We must see our hopes catch in our throat as we drink the dust of broken dreams. Who knew that drinking the dust of our idols is actually a gift?

FAILURE, FASTING, AND FEASTING

When Jesus met with the rich young ruler, the young man had done all the right things, followed the religious laws. So he asked Jesus what any good religious student who wants to do well should ask, “What must I do to have eternal life?” Rather than doling out more rules, Jesus pauses. Beautifully, before answering, Matthew writes that Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. Jesus then tells him to sell all he has, give to the poor, and come and follow Jesus. Famously, the young man goes away sad “because he had great wealth” (Mark 10:22 NIV). Jesus saw. Then Jesus loved.

It was out of Jesus' great love for the man that he longed to unsaddle him from the weight of his wealth. It is not that money or wealth is unequivocally bad (though Jesus did say it was hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven), but that his heart was in the grip of his wealth. Like a bit in a horse's mouth, wealth directed him. The man's

wealth was the millstone around his neck, the thing he served more than God. And like all false gods—from golden calves to a Target haul—when we find worth by our affluence, it promises rest but brings stress, increasing demands, and a greater devotion to a god that will never love us and always forsake us.

Do you long to feel unburdened by your stuff? Do you desire space to breathe so you could truly enjoy your family, friends, and neighbors? What would it be like to begin to imagine how you could creatively meet the needs of those around you? But when our closets, hearts, minds, and wallets are stuffed to the gills, there is no room to move toward others. So, what can we do now? As we use our spaces for others rather than ourselves, we push back against consumerism. Let's consider a few starting places or counterliturgies to push against our proclivities to use people, places, and things as objects of our consumption.

We must reacquaint ourselves with failure. We're experts at passing the buck and blaming our circumstances when we fail to measure up. We often move away from the people, places, and things that trigger our failures. We think a new lover, a new house, a new neighborhood or city will satisfy. Rather than running away, when we are forced to stare our failures in the face, we may pause long enough to long for and head toward home like the prodigal.

For example, in the middle of a recent marital spat, I flung angry, completely irrelevant words at my husband. Because I felt hurt, I aired dirty laundry, accused, stomped, and railed. It was not my finest moment. But after the tornado had passed, my husband said these words that stopped me in my tracks: "You are mine. I love you. You need to repent, but that doesn't mean that I don't love you. Ashley, I'm asking you to repent because I love you. And [the most gorgeous words in the universe] I'm not going anywhere." My husband wanted more than rightness for me. His anger didn't wall me out, it pulled me toward him. He saw me flailing my arms, trying to take up space, trying to be someone, even using sin to be seen, and he loved me. But

love can only be built when we reckon with our failure, when we practice repentance. Love can grow only when our stories are not focused on ourselves but when they move toward the other (even when hurting) and offer to take off the burden of all the golden calves we're shackled to.

Failure is a gift. When we are forced to drink the dust of our idols, we can begin to turn our sights toward home. It is a gift when we run into the places where they cease to satisfy. We fight with our spouses. Our children don't perform. Our job hijacks our time and fails to capture our affections. We suffer from depression, anxiety, and trying to wrestle a family schedule, all the while wondering what we do so much driving for. Success, esteem, good work to do, sharing food with others on your granite countertops, all point to the weight of glory that mere objects cannot hold. And when the objects break, when you lose your job, when your wife gets ill, when relationships are rocky, it all crumbles like the dust it is.

To practice counterliturgies to consumerism, we must also learn the rhythms of fasting and feasting. In a wonderful book on technology usage, Andy Crouch writes, "of course we are meant to eat, and even to feast, but only when we *fast* do we make real progress toward being free of our dependence on food to soothe our depression and anesthetize our anxieties." In other words, we need to hold fasting and feasting together; each only makes sense alongside the other.

We must create times to fast from a lifestyle of affluence we've become accustomed to. If we are to find holy in the suburbs, we must detach from stuff, but not in the sense that the material doesn't matter. God after all called his created order good, and deigned to come save us through his human body. And not in the sense that we are already detached from the forms of production, where we don't know the human cost of our cheap toys and clothes. Rather, we must see how, as Cavanaugh writes, "Things are not ends in themselves; they are means to greater attachment to others. . . . But to have a good relationship

with others, it is necessary to have a proper relationship with things.” We do this by fasting.

Some ideas are explored at the end of this chapter, but fasting from consumerism might look like putting your phone down, not buying something just because you can, interrogating your heart about your vacations and your granite countertop kitchen remodel. Because if the story of Jesus is true, then it means that, as Abraham Kuyper said, “every square inch” is under the lordship of Christ. If he is Lord, he is Lord over your stuff too. And because he loves you, like he loved the rich young man, he longs for us to be free—to take the heavy weight of consumerism off our chests and give us abundant life.

We must feast well too—which means loving people for who they are, enjoying our things for what they are and not the dreams they promise. May we not turn our families, homes, neighbors, strangers who produce products we consume, or communities into commodities to be bought and sold.

Our stuff must find its proper place—not as signifying objects but as harbingers of another world. C. S. Lewis writes, “They are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.” Our good golden objects are pictures that foreshadow glory. They tell us a true tale where we will one day be home in a place of rest, peace, and belonging. They are appetizers of the feast, but not the feast itself. We are not to gorge our bodies, minds, efforts, and hearts on mere nouns.

As we practice counterliturgies to consumerism, we ask for hearts that are not content with the thing itself but hunger for the source of our desires. We sit in this uncomfortable space as we realize how we have been more formed by a liturgy of consumerism than by the Word of God. When we step back and see how we’ve used our money in ways that are antithetical to what we say is in our hearts—that we’ve been worshiping a golden calf next to the altar of God—may we search desperately for rescue.

For now let's sit and feel our ears bare. May the dust of our idols catch in our throats and awake us to our deathly habits of consumption. For it is there—in the pulverizing of our golden objects, the bitterness of drinking it down—that grace starts in the suburbs.

COUNTERLITURGIES

to Consumerism ←

Consider these as starting points: a few practices to help shape your habits away from consuming people, places, or things.

1. *Failure.* Practice praying a historic prayer of confession to help reacquaint you with a healthy understanding of sin, confession, and repentance.
2. *Feast.* Surround yourself with things that you love. Enjoy great food and drink and focus your time on others as you enjoy. Plan times of feasting in your schedule rather than just getting by.
3. *Fast.* Practice removing yourself regularly from sites of consumerism—where you're tempted to consume things, people, or experiences (the mall, ads on TV, your favorite stores, social media). Instead take up the practice of writing down a gratitude list. Clear out your closet. Donate your stuff or find friends who would appreciate the things that gather dust in your home. Make a plan for how you engage with social media.
4. *Dare yourself to live on less.* Shop your closet instead of buying more. Save what you'd spend going out for a month and give someone an anonymous gift. Sponsor a child. Generosity begets generosity.
5. *Tithe your time.* Evaluate your schedule and ask why you do the voluntary things on your list. Schedule a block of time to help someone out, to spend uninterrupted and undistracted time with your family, and to be outside to meet your neighbors.

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