What Would Jesus Buy? Let’s ask an economist!

In honor of the Christmas shopping season, I’ve been asked to attend a campus screening of *What Would Jesus Buy?,* and comment on it from a capitalist’s perspective. So, how should an avowed capitalist answer that question?

To start, the more relevant question, from a religious perspective, is not “what would Jesus buy?”, but rather, “what would Jesus have you buy?” After all, there’s not a large record in the Bible of Jesus buying much of anything. When he wanted more wine at a wedding, he didn’t make a run to the liquor store; he just turned water into wine. When he had five thousand hungry followers who needed a meal, he didn’t dial up the pizza delivery man; he just turned a couple fish and some loaves of bread into a feast fit for a crowd. Now as much as I would like to be like Jesus and cut out the middle man in my pursuit of alcohol, that doesn’t really seem practical. So the real question is: what would Jesus have you buy?

As long as we are asking questions, we should also ask, what would a capitalist have you buy? Is the answer to the second question the same as the first? Since I am an economist by trade but only an amateur theologian (still looking through that glass dimly,) I’ll start with the second question and then move back to the first.

 Capitalism is an economic system where people engage in voluntary mutually beneficial transactions in search of happiness (flourishing, fulfillment, etc). A true capitalist, then, would want people to buy things that increase their happiness. Still, capitalism and materialism aren’t the same things. Materialism assumes that happiness can be found in owning material goods. Capitalism makes no such claim.

The Amish aren’t, as a rule, materialistic, but they flourish under a capitalist system that allows them to live as they see fit. If putting a penny in the poor man’s hat at Christmas makes you happy, capitalism allows you to donate to charity. If making your own Christmas cards makes you happy, capitalism allows that, too. If buying a flat panel TV makes you happy, then capitalism makes that a possibility. (Note: a rational purchase is only made if the marginal increase in happiness derived from said purchase exceeds the marginal (opportunity) cost of said purchase).

What of the macroeconomy? Isn’t Christmas shopping good for the economy? Buying ugly sweaters for people who won’t wear them is not good for capitalism. In fact it is bad. It wastes resources that are valued by other (taste challenged) individuals. Smart capitalists would only give cash presents for Christmas. Then, instead of two people exchanging presents whose marginal increase in happiness is less than the marginal cost of their purchases, only cash would have to be exchanged. That would only even occur if the dollar value of their mutual cash transfers would have been of a different size. (Think Scrooge, but with Christmas bonuses).

Now back to question one. The Jesus cliff notes can be found in the Great Commandment. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV).

Jesus wouldn’t want you to buy so much stuff for yourself that you neglected your giving to God (tithes and offerings). That principle stems from loving the Lord with all your heart. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21, NIV).

Jesus also wouldn’t want you to buy so much stuff for yourself that you neglected your neighbor who is in need, since you are to love them as yourself. Of course that begs the question of who your neighbor is…. The question here is more how much rather than what would Jesus have you buy.

You can’t love your neighbor if you hate yourself, so it seems that Jesus has no problem with people being happy with their wealth. No one who purposefully turns water into wine at a wedding can be against consumption for the sake of happiness. So, it seems that Jesus would have you consume things that make you happy as long as they don’t hurt your neighbor.

So capitalists, and Jesus, would have you buy things that make you happy. Capitalists would only donate to charity if it made them happy whereas Jesus claims that if you believe in him, giving to charity will indeed make you happy. So, don’t spend all your money on yourself, but when you do, spend it in such a way as to make yourself happy. Capitalists don’t have to be Christians (see Ayn Rand), but Christians can make for good enlightened capitalists.