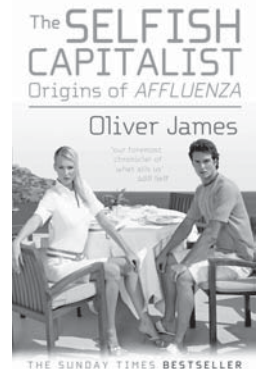


# The Selfish Capitalist: Origins of Affluenza

by Oliver James

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■ reviewed by Eve Poole

**O**liver James is a British psychologist who now works as a writer, commentator, and media presenter. He doesn't pull his punches. He starts his book with this assertion: 'Selfish Capitalism has led to a massive increase in the wealth of the wealthy, with no rise in average wages and there has been a substantial increase in emotional distress since the 1970s.' Citing a range of studies, he notes that 75% of modern mental disorders are peculiar to industrial communities, and that consumerism has been shown to reduce wellbeing. He argues that the 'selfish capitalism' epitomised in the UK by the Blatcherism of the last 20 years has led to increased affluence but reduced mental health, creating an outbreak of 'affluenza.' He coins this term to describe the 'virus' that affects people who, in spite of increasing material wealth, find that it does not increase their happiness, instead suffering increasing levels of depression and anxiety, and even substance abuse and impulse disorder.

His diagnosis resonates with the findings reported in Richard Layard's book on happiness (Penguin 2006), where he describes a salary ceiling of \$20,000 after which happiness does not appear to be materially altered. Given that average annual earnings in the UK currently stand at £25,428, on this analysis, dear reader, you may be overdue an affluenza jab.

While I do not buy all of James' argument, his point is already so universally accepted that 'affluenza' has entered the lexicon. And if you have not read his book *Affluenza* (Vermillion 2007), *The Selfish Capitalist* acts as a recapitulation as well as a development of his central thesis. And his argument about 'keeping up with the Joneses' consumerism rings heartbreakingly true. When attaining one summit just seems to give you a clearer view of the next, how can we be sure of our success and seemingly of our value if society keeps moving the goalposts? Of course, Christians recognise these central themes of relativity, value and fairness from the Bible, and particularly from the parables of Jesus.

The parable of the Dishonest Steward appears in Luke 16:1-13. A nightmare for preachers, it is a perplexing tale. A rich man discovers that his steward has been wasting his goods. He sacks him, and the steward decides that his last act as steward will be to reduce the debts owing to his master, that the debtors might remain his friends when he loses his job. Surprisingly, the rich man commends the steward for his shrewdness with these words: 'the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations'. The story famously ends with the phrase: 'you cannot serve God and mammon'. I have never had to preach on





*The unjust steward*

this parable, but I think a clue to its interpretation lies in noticing that its central message seems to be about not squandering one’s resources, even if those resources be worldly. What impresses the rich man in this parable is the steward’s entrepreneurialism, not his dishonesty. But securing our earthly position through such means is a far cry from achieving heavenly rewards, and Oliver James probes this deep dis-ease in this book. So perhaps affluenza is a timely reminder of: ‘for what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’ (Mark 8:36).

As part of a recent Church of England symposium on the theology of work, I wrote a paper, published in *Crucible* in January 2011, about the issue of Affluenza. It contains some good news for Christians about their resistance to the affluenza virus. This is because, according to Layard, one of the seven factors that affect happiness is the possession of a personal value system or a philosophy of life, with the strongest correlation being between happiness and a belief in God. This leads me to argue for the particularly precious nature of management as a vocation. This is not just because one of Layard’s other happiness factors is work that has meaning and purpose, but because of the need for managers to ensure that precious human effort is not being wasted on empty tasks for empty gain. This argues for managers to become more political in arguing for better systems of performance measurement and reward, that honour the whole person and give them dignity, and for better work-life balance and flexible working policies. If Christian managers can make the workplace more Kingdom-shaped, weary staff might take heart, recovering their mental and spiritual health through purposeful work. ■

*Eve Poole*

*A Prayer to be said by Merchants, Tradesmen, and Handicraftsmen.*

O eternal God, thou fountain of justice, mercy, and benediction, who, by my education and other effects of thy providence hast called me to this profession, that, by my industry, I may, in my small proportion, work together for the good of myself and others; I humbly beg thy grace to guide me in my intention, and in the transaction of my affairs, that I may be diligent, just, and faithful: and give me thy favour, that this my labour may be accepted by thee as a part of my necessary duty: and give me thy blessing to assist and prosper me in my calling, to such measures as thou shalt in mercy choose for me: and be pleased to let the Holy Spirit be for ever present with me, that I may never be given to covetousness and sordid appetites, to lying and falsehood, or any other base, indirect, and beggarly arts; but give me prudence, honesty, and Christian sincerity, that my trade may be sanctified by my religion; my labour, by my intention and thy blessing; that when I have done my portion of work thou hast allotted me, and improved the talent thou hast intrusted to me, and served the commonwealth in my capacity, I may receive the mighty price of my high calling, which I expect and beg, in the portion and inheritance of the ever blessed Saviour and Redeemer, Jesus. Amen.

*Jeremy Taylor, Holy Living (1650)*

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