



# Death by Suburb

[How to keep the suburbs from killing your soul]

## Study 3

of an 8 Week Study

### **The Environmental TOXIN:**

*I WANT MY NEIGHBOR'S LIFE*

### **The Spiritual PRACTICE:**

*FRIENDSHIP WITH THOSE WHO HAVE NO  
IMMORTALITY SYMBOLS*

### **Introduction**

An acquaintance recently told me that she and her boyfriend were buying their first house. She was aware that the sequence was not optimum.

I congratulated her on the new home and said, "You've got to be excited—your first home together!"

But she hedged: "Well, it's way out in Plainfield. It's only a three bedroom in one of those subdivisions. It's small. We're going to do the sweat equity thing, where you don't have to pay as much. You do the painting, you put in the sod. But at least I get to choose the color of the linoleum."

In what was supposed to be a time of joy, she couldn't even enjoy the moment. All she could think about was that the house wasn't as nice as she had hoped and, in some sense, she was already looking to the time when she and her boyfriend could move up to the next level of house.

I felt sad for her. The suburbs seem to create an environment of chronic discontent. We're never happy, because what we acquire is never exactly what we envisioned.

Part of the issue is that we tend keep a sharp eye to those who have just a little more than we do. We see others' lives and think, "Hey, how come mine doesn't look like that?"

The antidote to this toxin is to face another kind of person.

—Dave Goetz

### **Reading the Chapter**

This study is based on Chapter 4 of *Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul*. Chapter 4 explains the toxin as well as the key spiritual practice. Read the chapter before completing the study.

### **Understanding Your 'Burb**

No matter how big your home or SUV, no matter how successful your children, someone nearby has a bigger or better immortality symbol than you do. We're bombarded with 24-7 advertising



that attaches meaning to what we acquire. A friend calls this hyper-vigilance on the good life that others appear to possess a constant "state of covetousness." Another friend says with a twinkle in her eye, "I don't covet my neighbor's husband. Why would you want another husband? One is way more than enough."

An immortality symbol may be something as concrete as one's physical appearance or as abstract as "being a thought leader," as a journalist recently explained to me. He said he really didn't covet his neighbor's house. His hot pursuit in life was being perceived as an intellectual.

**1. What are some of the visible immortality symbols of your community? The invisible?**

**2. Think through some of the conversations you've had recently with friends or others? What do they say they want - that they don't yet have?**

- a. "We'd like to get a timeshare somewhere warm!"
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.
- j.

**3. Why is the I-want-my-neighbor's-life toxin so spiritually crippling?**

- a. It creates unnecessary anxiety in our life, such as overspending by buying a home I really can't afford.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.



## Discovering Biblical Spirituality

**1. Jewish writer Abraham Heschel points out that in Exodus 20:17, the last of the Ten Commandments is mentioned twice to stress its importance. Why do you think this commandment is so important?**

**2. Read through the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. What does the tenth tell us about the nature of God?**

**3. One of the truths of modern (or postmodern) life is that what you see is not real. You look at someone's life (their home, vacations, kids, opportunities) and think, subconsciously, "She has it all." What is the illusion? And why is it so dehumanizing?**

## Spiritual Exercises

Repentance (the spiritual U-turn) cuts through this ubiquitous state of wanting the life we don't yet have. There are at least two basic steps in this process: confessing the chronic discontent to God and doing an about-face in our lifestyle.

**Group Activity:** Spend a few moments in quietness, reflecting on how the sin of covetousness crops up in your life, how it creates anxiety and distorts your thinking on the gifts that God has given you.

After a few moments of silence, your group leader should begin by saying, "Father, we confess our sin of wanting a life other than that which you have given us."

Pause a few moments after each declaration by the group leader:

- **We confess that we are ungrateful for the good gifts that you have given us.**



- **We confess that by focusing on things that we don't yet have, we treat people as objects of our desire and not as human beings who are made in your image.**
- **We confess that many of the financial decisions that we make are guided not by wisdom but by greed.**
- **Father, open our eyes to those with fewer immortality symbols than we have. Open our hearts to learn and listen from them.**

**Group Activity:** Spend at least 10 minutes brainstorming ideas on how to create space in your life for those who have few or no immortality symbols or for those who are different in age or ethnicity than you are.

- a. If your family has a membership at a health club, find a new one or an activity center where you can workout with people of a lower economic level, with people of a different ethnicity than yours, with people older than you are.
- b. Start a small group that has real diversity in terms of economic levels, age clusters, ethnicity.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.

### **Quote to Live by**

*"If you live at the mercy of a crowd of greedy and hungry desires, then you will never find peace. You will never be satisfied because everything will bother you."*

—FRANCOIS FENELON, *THE SEEKING HEART*

### **A Final Word from Jesus**

*"Store your treasures in heaven, where they never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they will be safe from thieves. Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be."*

—MATTHEW 7:20–21 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)