

# DEUTERONOMY EXTRAS

# ETHICAL SHOPPING



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## INTRODUCTION...

In episode 5 of our Deuteronomy series, I use the example of systemic injustices in the clothing industry as an example of societal sin. When I realised my part in all this my reaction was two-fold – repentance for the past and a desire to do better in the future.

If you are like me and have found yourself resolving to do better, you've probably also asked the question: how? As I've discovered though, answering that question is harder than you might think!

Below are some reflections from me on the complexities of this area, and how I see the landscape, as well as some pointers to where you can find out brand by brand information to help you improve your shopping habits.

My conclusion would be that it is almost impossible to be perfect in this area, but equally that it is actually surprisingly easy to be better than we were! Resolve to change, pray for God's help, and do what you can – but then also remember God's grace for when you fall short (like I do)!

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## OVERVIEW OF THE LANDSCAPE...

*Finding out what's good and what's not*

The first challenge is actually finding the information you need to make informed choices. There is lots of information out there, but it can often be contradictory and bewilderingly complex. Global brands with global supply chains and a myriad of suppliers are not easy to make simple judgements on.

For me the complexities are highlighted by the example of one of my favourite brands – M&S. For years I have bought many of my clothes at M&S, in large part because of their commitment to ethical standards, through their "Plan A" programme.<sup>1</sup> Despite these commitments though, there have been well-documented failures on their part, and even their own reports on 'Plan A' are honest in admitting they still have some way to go.<sup>2</sup> What

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, <https://corporate.marksandspencer.com/sustainability/reports-and-quick-reads/report2018>

<sup>2</sup> See Ethical Consumer's page on M&S for an external response to some of the issues <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/company-profile/marks-spencer-group-plc> and the report in the previous note for M&S's own assessment of their performance, including areas where they are behind schedule.

should my response be? Should I avoid M&S because of their failings, or use them more because of what they have done well, and their commitment to improve moving forward?

*Which approach should I take?*

The example of M&S also begins to highlight the second big challenge, which is working out what I should actually be aiming for. It seems to me that there are three main approaches to ethical shopping, all of which have their strengths and weaknesses:

1. The first approach is to prioritise buying second hand. There are lots of positives to this approach – it reduces waste and our carbon footprints, and you can be certain that your cash is not going towards supporting a company with questionable ethics. The downside is that it doesn't help promote change in the clothing industry in any way – it simply side-steps the whole area.
2. The second approach is to seek out ethical 'best buys', buying your clothes from companies that have a clear and proven ethical commitment and track record. This used to be much harder to do than it is now, and there are an encouragingly growing number of strong brands out there. Companies like *Outland Denim*, *Nudie Jeans*, *JoJo Maman Bebe*, or *Boden*, are all good examples. The positives here are numerous, as your purchases are actively helping to drive positive ethical change in the industry, and help good companies succeed. Virtually no company is perfect though, and this approach can be harder in some areas than others.
3. The third approach is to seek out the 'best in class' of the major brands, looking to support those companies that are moving in the right direction in this area (such as M&S) and avoiding those that are not. There are obvious negatives to this, as sadly none of the biggest brands are as good as they could be. There are clear positives too though. This has the potential to deliver the biggest wins, as real change in the clothing industry will only really happen when the big players start taking ethics more seriously. It is also much the easiest route to take! That may seem like a cop out, but as a pastor I am all too familiar with talking to people with good intentions that they never acted upon. It is much better to do something than end up doing nothing because you never got round to it. Even for those committed to the other approaches, this is also worth being aware of, as we can also drive change by encouraging others – we may have friends for whom the other approaches may be too much, but who might be more open to this.

Personally, I have taken the third approach for some time – I want to make choices that will not just absolve me of responsibility for making things worse, but which will also drive positive change. My research in this area recently though has begun to change my perspective. It has highlighted that even my favourite brands have a way to go in this area (have I just been being lazy?), and also that genuinely ethical brands are becoming increasingly mainstream. So, I am now a 3, wanting to move to being a 2!

*What ethical markers matter most to me?*

The final challenge is working out what matters most to me. There are an awful lot of areas to consider, and some brands may be strong in some but weak in others. Do I care more about exploitative labour practices than corporate tax avoidance? Would I be happy buying from a company that pays and treats its workers well, but has question marks over it regarding animal cruelty? How important are environmental factors to me? How do I

feel about a brand with a low carbon footprint, but which uses plastic packaging? Obviously, we would all like to buy from brands that are perfect in every area – but sadly they are very very rare!

This is an area where I feel able to give some guidance, but do not want to be too directive. I would always encourage you to prioritise people in your considerations, as that flows from the priority that Jesus gave to loving our neighbour. That doesn't mean that other factors don't matter though, and in fact they can be unexpectedly impactful on people. For instance, climate change is having a devastating impact on the world's poor – so our carbon footprint makes more difference to people than we may imagine.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion

There is lots to think about here and, as you can probably tell, I am very definitely a fellow struggler and not a sorted expert. It's tempting to give up at this point and just despair at the complexities – but please don't! You may not be able to become perfect overnight – but we can (and must) begin to move in the right direction. By doing so we really can make a significant difference.

Below are some links to others who are much further along this road than I am, including helpful resources and specific recommendations –if you know of other resources, please do let me know, and I can update this!

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## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES...

- In the films I quoted from a report by [The Labour Behind the Label](#). They are a great campaigning organisation, and well worth a look.<sup>4</sup>
- For information on major brands and shops, check out the following (even if you don't agree with them 100% on priorities etc., they are a great place to start):
  - [Ethical Consumer](#)
  - [The Good Shopping Guide](#) (who also have 'best buys')
  - ...or just do a quick google for "ethical shopping"!!
- There are lots of other people who have walked this road before you, so think about checking out the advice of bloggers or instagrammers who you know and trust. We love Kezia Neusch, and her [TheWholeFoodDiary Instagram](#) and [blog](#) – she's written a couple of great blog posts on this area, including recommendations, which you can find [here](#). (she is also married to one of our trustees – but we're not biased, we're just well informed!).

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance: <https://www.tearfund.org/campaigns/climate-campaign>

<sup>4</sup> The quote in the film came from this page: <https://labourbehindthelabel.org/who-we-are/>