

CLOSER TO GOD (56) Challenges (2) The Danger of Materialism

As we continue our theme, “Closer to God”, we are now focusing on some challenges to drawing closer to God. Last week we began examining some of these challenges by discussing worldliness – a broad description of worldly pursuits that can hinder our holiness and discipleship. We noted that while the word “worldliness” is not found in the Bible, it is certainly addressed over and over. And we must strive to be “other worldly”.

Today, we want to dig a little deeper by noticing a specific area of worldliness – materialism. This is a serious concern because of the society and times we live in. And it is a subject addressed in such great detail that we will devote 2 lessons to this study.

I. What is materialism?

- a. Webster gives 2 definitions, one related to our belief that all things are material (naturalism), and the second, “*a preoccupation with or stress upon material rather than intellectual or spiritual things.*”¹
- b. Practically stated, it is the pursuit of material things over spiritual matters. One who puts his physical possessions before God. Consider the rich, young ruler of Matthew 19:21-22 – he went away sorrowful because he had great possessions. We will see more examples in a few moments.
- c. Materialism is the attitude that elevates temporal things over the eternal. It is the attitude that success is measured by one’s possessions.
- d. We live in such an affluent society that for many this is one of our greatest concerns. We could devote the hour to describing how wealthy we really are and how much we have. We could discuss our homes, transportation, eating habits, vacations & travel, etc. The bottom line is that we are TRULY blessed. Compared to much of the world, nationally we are some of the wealthiest people on earth. And beyond that, not many of us would be considered in poverty even in our communities. I mention this because, as we are going to see in these lessons, this ought to be a concern.
- e. There are systems of religion that promote wealth building and tie it to our faith. The prosperity gospel teaches that God wants you to have just about anything you want. It is a false religion that caters to materialistic attitudes. That is why it is important that we have a proper Biblical perspective about materialism.

II. The Bible and materialism

- a. Like *worldliness*, the word *materialism* is not found in the Bible. But you find it throughout its pages both by instructions and examples.
- b. **1 Timothy 6:9-10**, *But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.* One of the foremost passages that warns us against the desire to pursue wealth.
- c. **Hebrews 13:5**, *Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’*
- d. **Luke 12:15**, *And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”* This is followed up with the parable of the rich fool that we will examine in a while.

¹ “Materialism.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/materialism>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2023.

- e. **Ecclesiastes 5:10**, *He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.* A few years back we engaged in a study of Ecclesiastes, Solomon's pursuit for the meaning of life. He had great possessions and wisdom to manage them wisely. But he made many observations about the pursuit of wealth.
- f. **Matthew 6:19-21**, *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*
- g. **Matthew 6:24**, *"No one can serve two masters..."* This leads to his passage about not worrying but trusting God to take care of us.

III. **Materialism was the downfall of many examples in scripture**

- a. **Numbers 22-25 – Balaam.**
 - i. Was willing to compromise to receive payment from Balak, king of Moab who wanted to curse Israel in the wilderness. Interestingly, Balaam knew he could NOT speak against YHWH's will. And 4 times he blessed Israel instead of cursing them. HOWEVER, in chapter 25, we read how he found a way around God's instructions. The people of Israel committed harlotry with the women of Moab. Many Israelites died by plague as a result of this sin.
 - ii. **Jude 11 & 2 Peter 2:15** both mention his greed (materialism).
 - iii. **Lesson:** When we have a materialistic mindset it can cause us to compromise our faith and look for SUPPOSED loop holes in God's word. This would be the one seeking to justify what would otherwise be considered sinful for materialistic gain. Example: Someone that deliberately volunteers (chooses) to work extra time which results in missing assembling with the saints.
- b. **Joshua 7 – Achan.**
 - i. After taking Jericho, they turn toward Ai, a small and insignificant town where they were defeated, 36 men were killed.
 - ii. The reason: Achan, coveted some of the items in Jericho which were supposed to be consecrated to God (Joshua 7:20-21). The blood of those defeated at Ai were the result of Achan's greed.
 - iii. **Lesson:** Sometimes materialism leads to stealing and unethical practices and taking measures to cover up one's covetousness.
- c. **1 Kings 11 – Solomon.**
 - i. This chapter records the turning away of Solomon from the Lord. Going back, we learn that it was his many wives and concubines (totaling about 1000) that were responsible. Most of these were likely wives of treaties with surrounding kings and nations. Solomon's material possessions certainly factored into this as we read about his opulent lifestyle.
 - ii. Also consider Deuteronomy 17:16-17, part of the instructions given concerning their king when they appointed him: *But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the Lord has said to you, 'You shall not return that way again.' Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself.* Solomon violated all of this and in his prosperity he turned from YHWH and honored the non-gods of the nations around them.
 - iii. **Lesson:** Prosperity can cause us to forget God and seek worldly pursuits. It can also lead to a compromise of our faith – seeking an alternative that makes one's materialistic lifestyle acceptable. Example: The prosperity gospel that many advocate today. Thanks to these false teachers, far too many today see God as their ATM. And when He "fails to follow through", they either abandon Him or question their own misdirected faith.
- d. **2 Kings 5 – Gehazi.**

- i. Records the healing of Naaman. Naaman was commander of the army of Syria who was oppressing Israel at the time (because of their sinful rebellion against YHWH). But he was a leper. An Israelite servant girl told him about Elisha (not by name). When he is finally healed by dipping 7 times in the Jordan, as instructed, he returns and desires to pay Elisha. But he refuses payment
 - ii. 2 Kings 5:20ff records the greed of his servant Gehazi. He heard and pursued Naaman and his entourage and asked for a few things – a talent of silver and some garments. They were gladly given, but when Gehazi returned to Elisha, he was exposed. He became a leper the rest of his life.
 - iii. **Lesson:** Materialism is a product of our heart. Gehazi's greed was internal and he thought he would not be caught. Do we find ourselves living double lives? When around our brethren we act one way, but we are more materialistic when they are not around? What measures will we take to get a little "easy money"? Will we play the lottery thinking "no one will find out"?
- e. **Acts 5** – Ananias and Sapphira
 - i. They lied to God, the Holy Spirit and Peter about the value of property they sold. They were each struck dead by the Lord immediately. And fear came upon the church – Acts 5:11
 - ii. **Lesson:** Are we honest with our financial dealings? Especially toward our brethren? Are we prideful and acting to be recognized?
- f. **Matthew 26:14-15** – Judas Iscariot
 - i. We cannot forget him with this subject. For 30 pieces of silver, he betrayed his Lord. He was identified as the treasurer of the group and a thief (John 12:4-6). While he regretted it, he went out and hanged himself.
 - ii. **Lesson:** What lengths are we willing to take to gain a little more. Will we "sell our soul"?
- g. **Luke 12:16-21** – the parable of the rich fool
 - i. After Jesus warned His disciples to beware of covetousness, He presented the parable of the rich, fool – a successful man who failed to consider God in his plans.
 - ii. Lesson: 12:21 - *"So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."* In our materialistic pursuits, do we consider God? Is He really first in our lives.
- h. The point of this list is to identify some examples of materialism and where it leads. We see in this study the dangers that Paul warned of in 1 Timothy 6:9-10.

In this lesson we can see that the Bible addresses materialism, both in precept and example. In our next lesson, we will take a closer look at the dangers of materialism and what we can do to avoid this attitude.

I conclude with an illustration I once heard. Whether it was true or not I do not know. After preaching a sermon in a small country church, a man responded to the invitation desiring to be baptized. They went down to the nearby creek. While both the preacher and the respondent were in the water he suddenly said, "Wait a minute, my wallet is in my back pocket." The preacher responded, "That's ok, that needs to be baptized too."

If we wish to draw closer to God, we must not let material matters hinder us. What about you? Would you choose God over "stuff"? Think about it.