

Materialism

By David Phillips

That all men need physical things to sustain them in this life is a well known fact. Our bodies are designed in such a way that we need food, water, and clothing for nourishment and to protect us from the elements. Blessed is God who provides such things for us that we may enjoy them—and enjoy them we do. In fact, you might say that we enjoy these physical blessings far more than we should. It would seem that mankind has forgotten the God from whom these blessings come and we have devoted our lives to attaining an abundance of material things. In our minds we no longer need only food, water, and clothing, but we also “need” as much of as many things as possible. Having forgotten God in our pursuit of these material things we have also forgotten the most important need of all—our need for our God (Acts 17:24-28).

Indeed, mankind has allowed the riches that are in the world to deceive us to the point that we would rather put our faith in the weakness of material possessions than in the power of the Almighty God. Nevertheless, our need for God still remains; therefore He is still available to all who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). But we must be made aware of this growing threat of materialism, for it is a great danger to the people of God.

The True Nature of Materialism

Like all sin, materialism has the ability to deceive the mind into thinking that physical things are more valuable than they really are. The sin of the king of Tyre, as it is recorded in Ezek. 28:4-8, is one example of the deceptive nature of materialism. Solomon observed the inadequacy of material things in Ecclesiastes 5:10. People think that they can find satisfaction in riches, but as Solomon points out, *“He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.”*

Materialism has a way of twisting otherwise good deeds into evil deeds. Throughout His ministry Jesus exposed the truth about riches. He rebuked the tax collectors who, under the guise of performing a service for their country, cheated and overtaxed the people. He condemned the scribes and Pharisees because they stole from the widows, cheated the people, and were full of all manner of greed and hypocrisy, but hid those things through their pious deeds (Matt. 23:14; Luke 11:39). In Luke 12:15 Jesus stated, *“Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”* To illustrate the vanity of such things, He gave the parable of the rich fool in the verses following that statement (Luke 12:16-21). In the parable, the rich fool thought that his life was secure because of his riches, when in fact his life would be required of him that very night and his riches would prove useless. Jesus concluded the parable by saying, *“So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”*

In Matt. 6:19-20 Jesus taught the insecurity of riches, that they are susceptible to corruption and open to theft. In Luke 18:24-27 He said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. The reason for this was that those who desired to be rich in this life put their faith in their riches rather than in the power of God.

We must be reminded that there is an eternal destination waiting for us when this life is over. What we value in this life will determine what that destination will be: eternal life if we set value godly things or eternal condemnation if we value worldly things.

Where the Heart Lies

In Matt. 6:21 Jesus pointed out that *“where you treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* For this reason, He commanded us to lay up for ourselves treasure in heaven (vs. 19-20)—to set our hearts in heaven. This is the key to finding the way to true happiness and fulfillment. There are many people who claim to love and serve God, but spend more time planning ways to increase their financial security in this life rather than establishing their spiritual security in heaven. If we desire true security and happiness we must direct our desires toward heavenly things. For only in this can we find true happiness. How can we accomplish this? *“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. **But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble”*** (Matt. 6:31-34, emph. mine DP).

Notice what Jesus commanded the rich young ruler to do in order to set up for himself treasure in heaven in Matt. 19:21 (sell all that he had). Does this mean that every person must sell all that he/she has in order to have treasure in heaven? Of course not! The point Jesus was making was that, in spite of the young ruler's obedience in every other aspect of the law, his love was torn between earthly wealth and God. If he wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven he had to be willing to give up the physical affections—in his case it was the riches of this world. But this may be different from person to person. If our love is for alcohol, we must give it up. If we love the praise of men, we must seek to humble ourselves and to do our good deeds in secret. If our love for our physical families hinders us from serving God wholeheartedly, we must seek to overcome that (Matt. 19:29). We cannot serve two masters (Luke 16:13). Therefore, we must be willing to give up everything that draws our affections away from God. Only then can we truly experience the joy that comes from serving God; only then can we experience the peace of God which surpasses all understanding (Phil. 4:7).

Laying Up Treasure in Heaven

How do we lay up treasure for ourselves in heaven? First and foremost we must become children of God whereby we also become joint-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17). This requires that we believe in Jesus as the Son of God, repent of our sins, confess Him as Lord, and obey the gospel in baptism and continued faithfulness. Then, as children of God we must use whatever means God has blessed us with in this life to do the work He has specified in the New Testament scriptures. Consider the following passages:

1 John 3:16-19: *“But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?”*

1 Tim 6:17-19: *Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”* (Notice that this is a command not an option).

Titus 3:8: "...those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men."

Heb 13:15-16: "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

- ☞ How often do you share with others those things which you have in abundance? Are you like the rich young ruler who was saddened at the thought of giving up his possession for other people?
- ☞ Consider your daily use of free time. Where we spend most of our time and what we spend that time doing is an indication of what we value most. What does your lifestyle indicate concerning your affections?
- ☞ How often do you make excuses when it comes to spending time with or doing things for other people?
- ☞ When your budget is tighter than you would like, do you stress and become irritable, or do you use that as time to go to God in prayer and as an opportunity to trust in Him with all your heart?
- ☞ In short, we lay up treasure in heaven by spending our time and resources to accomplish the will of God rather than selfishly hoarding them in an effort to satisfy our worldly lusts. It is for this purpose that God gives us all that we have. "As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10).

Conclusion

Where does your heart lie? What do you strive for most in this life? What is the nature of your goals? Have you fallen in to the trap of materialism? God offers us a solution! If you are not a Christian, you can become a child of God today by repenting of your sins, confessing Jesus as Lord and being baptized in His name. As children of God we have the freedom to live righteous and lay up our treasure in heaven by serving our Lord and Savior.

If you are a Christian and your focus has been diverted, will you please consider your ways and put your trust in God (Prov. 3:5-7)? Remember that this life is fleeting. Its pleasure may seem good for a moment, but the pleasures of heaven are for an eternity.