

The Heart of the Matter

Lesson 14: The Christian's Attitude Toward Material Things

1. Two Worlds

The human being is related to two worlds. First, he is a spiritual being, connected with an unseen world of spiritual powers and principles that can only be perceived by faith. Secondly, he is a physical being, connected with the present but shorter phase of earthly existence. The challenge is to live properly in a material world without losing sight of the spiritual dimension that is no less real but harder to comprehend.

2. The Necessities of Life

God has so ordered human life that it requires much maintenance to function properly. Food is a constant necessity; the harshness of the climate demands adequate shelter and clothing. Specific cultures may demand other material necessities, like transportation. Here in the U.S. it is difficult to adequately function in society without personal transport. A great amount of time and effort is needed to provide ourselves with the things that sustain life.

If we are not careful, these necessities of life can subtly change status. That is, we can emphasize them to the point that they take on an importance beyond that of necessity. Clothing is a necessity, but it can become a matter of fashion and thus challenge our finances and sense of modesty. Shelter is a necessity, but size, style, appointments and furnishings of a home can overshadow the need for

shelter. Food is a necessity, but we can become enamored with it to the point of gluttony.

Further, we can begin to relate so closely with the material aspects of life that we begin to define ourselves by them. We might judge our importance, self-worth or success in terms of the home we live in, the car(s) we drive or our annual income. When we do this, we will inevitably be thrown out of spiritual kilter. It may be

Money has power out of all proportion to its purchasing power. Because the children of this world understand this, they can use money for noneconomic purposes. And use it they do! Money is used as a weapon to bully people and to keep them in line. Money is used to "buy" prestige and honor. Money is used to enlist the allegiance of others. Money is used to corrupt people. Money is used for many things; it is one of the greatest powers in human society.

[Foster, *Money, Sex & Power*, p. 54]

difficult to determine the source of our unease, but so often in life our troubles begin with an overemphasis upon material things.

3. Keeping Things in Balance

God counsels us to keep material things in perspective. This demands a realistic assessment of these things, for our affection for them comes from a distorted view of their importance.

- 1) Riches are unstable (Pr 23:4-5).
- 2) Material things decay. Moth and rust destroy; thieves steal (Mt 6:20).
- 3) Affection for money and what it buys is the springboard for a multitude of evils (1 Tim 6:10).
- 4) Material things will not be part of our eternal future. "You can't take it with you" (1 Tim 6:7; Eccl. 5:15).
- 5) Possessions can be spiritually blinding as the rich young ruler painfully learned (Mt 19:21-22).

4. The Antidote for Materialism

An overemphasis upon material things leads to chronic anxiety and dissatisfaction. Their uncertain, unstable nature means the covetous person never has enough, for in the back of his mind he is always aware that it can be lost. Maintaining and maximizing one's investment takes constant vigilance and effort. Markets go up and down with the most subtle nuances and whims. No amount of money or things will ever make our lives predictable, safe and secure.

So, God counsels contentedness with the basics and satisfaction with our present material status.

1) *"And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1 Tim. 6:8).*

2) *"Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:2).*

3) *"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" (Matt. 6:31-32).*

4) *"Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:11-12).*

5) *"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. 6:33-34).*

These verses stress the spiritual connection we have with heaven. When we take our eyes off God and begin to focus upon the material things of life, anxieties and frustrations creep in. We must learn to be content with what God has let us use for His sake, for truly we do not "own" anything in the ultimate sense.

While greed and covetousness grow in the vacuum of what one does not possess, thankfulness springs from an awareness and appreciation for what one has. Passages encouraging thankfulness abound, but note the following:

1) *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).*

2) *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:16-18).*

3) *"As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving" (Col. 2:6-7).*

As we learn to live with an ever-present appreciation for our spiritual blessings, and as we cultivate a contentedness with our present material state, our attachment to material things will lessen. True happiness is not here; it is not in material satisfaction; it cannot be bought and stored. True happiness springs from a heavenly attitude that puts material things in their place.

Questions for Discussion

- 1.** How does our society encourage us to overemphasize material things?
- 2.** How might we unwittingly pass on materialistic values to our children?
- 3.** Discuss the implications of Luke 16:10. What can we learn from this statement?
- 4.** According to 2 Cor. 4:18, what is the duration of “seen” and “unseen” things?
- 5.** What challenge/promise did God lay before Israel in Malachi 3:8-10?
- 6.** What did Jesus offer the rich young ruler if he would sell his possessions and follow Him? How did the young man react to this offer?
- 7.** What does Jesus promise those who suffer deprivation for His sake (Matt. 19:29-30)?