

Meeting the Challenges of 21st Century Culture

The challenge of materialism: How the culture sees success

Intro: We have in this series considered several challenges to our faith in this 21st century culture—political correctness, moral relativism, the redefinition of marriage, pluralism, and sexual immodesty along with several related studies.

As we think of the challenges that we face in our culture, one of the more subtle ones is the challenge of materialism.

What do we mean by materialism? Materialism has three definitions in the dictionary, all of which could be discussed in a spiritual context. To put it another way--there are three kinds of materialism that may challenge us.

The philosophical doctrine that matter is the only reality and that everything in the world, including thought, will, and feeling, can be explained only in terms of matter.

The doctrine that comfort, pleasure, and wealth are the only or highest goals or values.

The tendency to be more concerned the material than with spiritual or intellectual goals or values.

It would make sense that those who think that matter is the only reality would logically embrace a value system in which the attaining and the pleasurable use of things is the ultimate value in life and that spiritual pursuits are likewise irrelevant. But materialism is inherently contradictory to the values of those who believe in God, the “health and wealth” televangelists notwithstanding.

We can see the pervasiveness of materialism in our culture.

The concepts of personal freedom and economic prosperity are embedded in our social DNA; we all grow up hearing about and being encouraged to pursue the “American Dream.” But if we listen wisely, we may perceive that we are being indoctrinated into the conception that wealth is our birthright; and that if we fail to become wealthy, we are failures in life. Our sense of who we are, our self-worth, is shaped by how much income we can take in. In addition, we live in a consumer-driven economy that depends upon people to keep buying; and so we are constantly being bombarded with messages that say, “You have to have this. You need this. You cannot be happy without it; but you will be intensely happy if you get it.”

Because so many have bought into materialism, we have become a nation awash in financial debt.

In the quest for having it all we can easily be lured into the debt trap. The average American household has \$7000 in unsecured credit card debt.

Not being able to say no to what we want is more than just a childish bad habit; it is a grown-up sin. Many believers live beyond their means, refuse to budget their finances, and are living proof of the old

adage that when a person's outgo exceeds his income, then his upkeep will be his downfall.

Materialism can have a high price tag. The quest for more can lead ultimately to disillusionment, depression, and the destruction of families and other relationships.

How Christians should respond to materialism

We need to recognize that materialism is an attitude issue and not an income issue.

First let's clear up some misconceptions.

There is no inherent virtue or spiritual value in being poor; to warn against the sin of materialism is not to advocate a theology of poverty or a life of asceticism.

Material prosperity is not an indication of divine approval or divine testimony to one's personal righteousness.

A person may be wealthy and righteous like Abraham; he may likewise be wealthy and wicked like those mentioned by Asaph (Ps. 73:12).

"Behold, these are the wicked; And always at ease, they have increased in wealth." (Psalm 73:12)

Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked," (Revelation 3:16–17)

Materialism is not just a problem for the rich; it is also a temptation to the poor.

The desire to work hard and better one's station in life is not in itself materialistic; in fact, the Bible speaks of this as part of an honorable character.

"Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, But the hand of the diligent makes rich." (Proverbs 10:4)

Materialism is wrong because it fosters several ungodly attitudes.

It fosters discontentment in contradiction to Heb. 13:5.

"Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,"" (Hebrews 13:5)

It can lead to competitive and angry emotions like envy or jealousy concerning what other people have (James 4:1-2)

"WHAT is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask." (James 4:1–2)

Essentially materialism is wrong because it is rooted in selfishness and excessiveness.

The primary motivation of the materialistic person is to satisfy self.

Excessiveness: the materialistic person pursues material ends at the expense of spiritual priorities, upsetting the proper balance and proportion God intends our lives to have.

And materialism often fosters self-deception. A person generally does not think his own material pursuits are either selfish or excessive.

Materialism leads to the sin of covetousness,

We must come to terms with the temporary nature of all things material.

Jesus stressed to his disciples that it was foolish to build a life around material things, since they all were subject to loss and corruption.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. (Mt. 6:19)

John likewise urges the disciples to see that love for the world is misplaced for the same reason:

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever. (1 Jn. 2:15-17)

What both these verses stress is that when we invest ourselves in wealth, pleasure, and creature comforts, we are buying bad investments which may be enjoyed for the moment, but will ultimately be lost.

We must affirm the corrupting influence of material pursuits.

Materialism moves into the place that properly belongs to God; it is its own subtle form of idolatry in which we depend upon things rather than depend upon God. That's what happened to the church at Laodicea. Money stepped into God's place.

Jesus likewise urged His disciples to recognize this truth:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Mt. 6:20-21)

We often miss the power of that statement. Whatever captures the heart, controls our life!

No wonder Paul urged the Colossians:

If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. (Col. 3:1-4)

We must acknowledge a spiritual nature can only be satisfied with spiritual things.

The reality is that materialism has all the features of an addiction. As one person described it:

An addictive experience creates predictable and reliable sensations, becomes the primary focus and absorbs attention, temporarily eradicates pain and other negative emotions, provides artificial sense of self-worth, power, control, and security, exacerbates the problems and feelings it is sought to remedy, and leads to a loss of relationships.

We can easily see how materialism manifests these tendencies. A person is led to believe that obtaining some material thing will give them happiness. They throw themselves in the pursuit of that thing, often abandoning other important things around them. When the thing is acquired, it feels good at least for while. There is momentary relief and even feeling of self-worth and power/control over one's circumstances. But of course the high doesn't last long. The new wears off. And the cycle starts again. Paul said it perfectly:

“But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.” (1 Timothy 6:9–10)

The problem of course with this materialistic anthropology is that it sees only half a man! Yet Biblically we can see that we are far more. *Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness;”* (Gen. 1:26)

Being made in the image of God, we were created for a relationship with Him. Only He can fill that place in our inner being.

Sadly many a person has tried to fill the hole with things that won't fit—wealth, pleasure, education, power. The Preacher got it right when he concluded:

Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun. (Eccl. 2:9-11)

Where could one find a more powerful indictment of secularism and its attending materialism?

We must believe that eternal presence of God is a far greater investment than the passing pleasures of this world.

What is yet to come, of course, is a position of faith. God has given us glimpses of our eternal reward; but He asks us to trust Him—that all

that He will give us will greatly surpass all that we may have given up for Him. We hear these comparisons often in Scripture:

For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:17-18)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:18)

We must see all things earthly as tools by which to achieve our eternal goals.

Material things are not intrinsically evil; they are made evil by the misplaced emphasis of their possessors.

Instead the Scriptures teach us that having material things that can and should lead us to be thankful to God “who gives us richly all good things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17).

Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart. (Eccl. 5:19-20)

Having material things can provide us with resources to do good works for God.

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. (1 Tim. 6:17-19)

Conclusion: I've watched people bravely fend off the onslaught of adversity and become stronger in faith through it, and then succumb almost without resistance to increasing prosperity. At a time when life was easiest, they stumbled because they were captured by the wealth and pleasure of an easy life.

Let's not let that happen to us! Instead let us "lay up treasure in heaven."