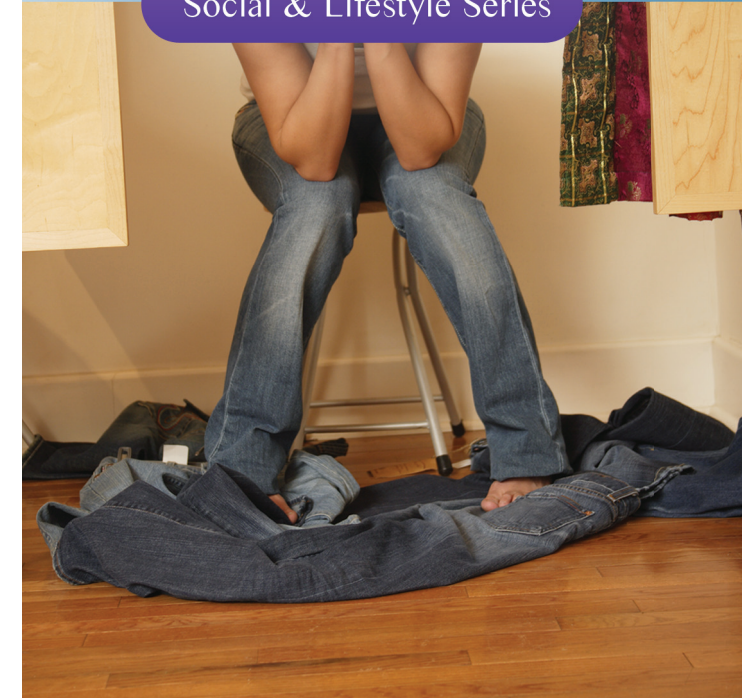


Materialism: Blowing the Whistle

Social & Lifestyle Series



shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33). “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed” (Luke 12:15). Paul modelled, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil. 4:11), but he warned, “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10).”

Do an Audit

Personal stock-taking—something we rarely do—is a necessary exercise. Periodic checkups for persons as for cars makes sense. Such an audit can take various forms. We might keep a log for a week noting the time we use for personal care (sleep, exercise), for travel/relaxation, to earn money, or for conversation with family, friends, and with God. How we spend our time and money is a strong indicator of our values. In what kind of home will we live? What amenities will it have? At what expense level will we clothe ourselves? How expensive will our eating habits be? How will we spend discretionary money? What luxuries will we allow ourselves? What will be the proportion of savings and tithe to our total income? Stephen Covey’s bestseller, *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People* suggests that we ask, “What would I like to see written on my tombstone?” Covey advocates personal mission statements, then shows how to implement them. My students report that, far from binding them, these mission statements have helped them make good choices and given them freedom.

Where is your treasure? The most secure investment is in God’s kingdom. Jesus advised, “Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:24, NRSV). To paraphrase: put your money in heavenly investments, then follow God’s Dow Jones index. Soon your heart will be caught up in kingdom developments. Surprisingly, Jesus advocated self-interest as a motive: “Store up treasures for yourselves.” Self-interest is not evil; it is legitimate. Selfishness, however, which involves centering on the self to the exclusion of others, is always wrong.

Think Ahead

Managing our gifts (assets) well means being mindful of the day of the big audit. All of us will give account of our stewardship. This realization is sobering. We must ask, when putting out the plastic or signing cheques, “how will this play out?” The Bible doesn’t throttle human initiative, but neither does it bless self-absorbed wealth-getting.

Be Positive

Give thanks to God for money and the ability to acquire it. But acquire possessions according to the criteria of usefulness, not status. Be self-conscious about your life’s direction and establish a mission statement. Resist consumerist propaganda. Pray about investments and expenditures. Let your faith in God extend as far down as your pocketbook. The opposite of materialism is not poverty; it’s godliness. Our bottom-line challenge: Beware the lure of materialism. Get help for the “disease” if you are in its grip. Positively put, accept the invitation to an adventure with God in money matters. ■

For additional reading, see Richard Foster’s *Freedom of Simplicity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); John Schneider’s *Godly Materialism: Re-thinking Money and Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994); and Ronald Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word, 1990).

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Faith and Life

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Is there a proper Christian use of money? A sticky question. Many North American Christians are relatively well-to-do and have substantial money at their discretion. They are not asking, “How can I survive?” Instead, they are asking, “How can I live more comfortably and acquire more?” Yet some are wondering, “How should my faith affect my spending?”

North Americans have a love affair with acquiring, with shopping, with conspicuous consumerism, with self-indulgence. Christians are constantly being pulled into the swirling obsession with material things. Worse than run-away inflation is run-away materialism.

A Close-Up of Materialism

Materialism and wealth are not the same. Abraham, Solomon, and Job all possessed great wealth. Materialism represents an attitude toward things. It is an eagerness to “have and to hold” possessions, a preoccupation with money for self-advantage, and a zeal to pursue the “good life” without regard for much else. To themselves, materialists whisper, “If only I had a little more.” Materialism widely afflicts baby boomers, retirees, as well as those between these groups.

When does someone have enough? When they own one car? Or, three cars and a recreational vehicle? In T.H. White’s book, *The Once and Future King*, King Arthur observes that “...nobody could define the state of ‘having’”. A knight with a silver suit of armour could immediately call himself a have-not, if he met a knight with a golden one.”

Lot and Balaam illustrate the materialist mindset that elevates possessions over other values. Lot chose the fertile plain of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 13), and Balaam pocketed his “dough” even if it meant selling Israelites into immorality (Jude 11). Remember Jesus’ cryptic statement about the rich man, who, in the parable, spent money and energies building barns: “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions,” said Jesus (Luke 12:15).

Doing a Spiritual Biopsy

Given the prevalence of the materialism virus, let’s do a biopsy of it.

Good Health

Who is a healthy Christian? It is the person who trusts God for salvation but also for earthly goods. It is the one with an unshakeable confidence that God is not a miser, but desires good for every believer. God not only is good; he is sufficient. The healthy Christian relaxes in God’s provision and gives the kingdom of God first place.

Signs of Trouble

Shifty spiritual eyes are an early sign of trouble. God’s kingdom remains within sight, but God’s sufficiency is subtly, even unconsciously, questioned. The lure of “things” blurs the sharp outline of God’s kingdom. A grasping, even coveting spirit, emerges. Case studies of this pathology are numerous. Eve decides to go for something “more” (Gen. 3). A good wardrobe excites Gehazi, Elisha’s servant (2 Kings 5). The farmer in Jesus’ parable is preoccupied only with crops and barns (Luke 12:13-21). An imbalance, a part of the illness, easily sets in. Cancer cells destroy the body when they go out of control. That can happen with finances, too. To be sure, there are sound reasons for acquiring material possessions: emergencies, hospital care, retirement needs, leaving an inheritance. Financial security ranked as a most-emphasized value (60%) in a study measuring materialism

among Mennonites (J.H. Kauffman and L. Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic*, 1991). Could it be that financial security weighs too heavily for us?

Danger Symptoms

Materialism as a disease has reached dangerous proportions when attachment to “things”—properties, investments, adult “toys” (cars, computer systems)—clearly crowds out spiritual values, such as compassion. Amos thunders away about this obsession in his “woe” sermon: You lie in beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches (fancy furniture). You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves (sumptuous eating out; specialty foods). You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments (stereos, CDs, entertainment centres). You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions (cosmetics, cosmetics, cosmetics). *But you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph* (Amos 6:3-7). Clearly, for Amos, affording does not constitute licence to spend extravagantly and conspicuously. Amos complains that people addicted to things lose their concern for people in trouble. They no longer grieve over calamity. Similarly, James insists that faith that sends the poor away empty is dead (2:14-17). Dazzled by wealth-getting and enjoyment, North American Christians (like the Laodicean Christians) are dulled in their senses (cf. Rev. 3:14-22). Their capacity for compassion is blunted. They have money for cruises, fancy vehicles, and summer homes, but mission endeavours at home and abroad, and Christian schools, must be downsized for lack of funds. Do Amos’s accusations also apply to us?

Advanced Stages

Two stories illustrated the advanced stages of the disease of materialism. Wealthy King Ahab was so set on acquiring more property that (with

Jezebel spurring him on) he stopped short of nothing: falsifications, unscrupulous action, even murder. The early church encountered a case of advanced materialism in Ananias and Sapphira. These two presented themselves as devoted, committed believers, but misrepresented the price for which they had sold the property they were donating (Acts 5). For them, the disease of materialism was fatal—a warning that covetousness is dangerous to one’s spiritual health. The worldly mind chirps, as Thomas Fuller noted in a sermon 340 years ago, “Gain is godliness”—a demonic inversion of the biblical claim, ‘Godliness... is gain.’ (1 Tim. 6:6).”

Preventative Maintenance

What then is the prescription for persons with the virus of materialism? Focus on a new centre. A way to deal with children fighting over toys is to alert them to a better option. Little is gained by incessant harping. “Don’t be materialistic.” Instead, consider an alternative. A focus on Christ vaccinates against materialism. This is not simply Pietism. Paul combats “spiritual diseases” by turning the attention to Christ (Col. 1:9-18). Just as a compass needle seeks the magnetic pole, so believers seek the things above (Col. 3:2). At stake is a fundamental worldview in which nothing is more decisive than Christ Jesus. Letting Christ be Lord realigns our values, not as words from our lips but as a loud “amen” deep within our being.

Listen to the Word

A third of Jesus’ parables deals with economics. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the now-enlightened materialist wants to help others, but the answer is “they have Moses and the Prophets.” The advice, in short: “Listen to the Word!” Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things

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