

The Influence of Materialism



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 John 2:16, 17; Luke 14:26–33; 12:15–21; Deut. 8:10–14; 1 Tim. 6:10; John 15:5; Gal. 2:20.*

Memory Text: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (*Romans 12:2, NKJV*).

The Word of God tells His people not to “be conformed to this world” (*Rom. 12:2, NKJV*), but the lure of materialism, the inordinate desire for wealth and for what we think wealth can bring, is powerful. Very few people, whether rich or poor, are beyond the reach of materialism. This includes Christians, as well.

Nothing is wrong with being rich, or even working hard to get ahead in order to provide comfortably for yourself and your loved ones. But when money, or the pursuit of money, becomes all-encompassing, we have fallen into the devil's trap and have, indeed, become “conformed to this world.”

The world conveys the idea that the good life, the abundant life, can be found only in money. But money is one mask that Satan hides behind in order to secure our allegiance. Materialism is one of Satan's weapons of choice against Christians. After all, who doesn't like money and what money can bring us in the here and now? Its greatest achievement is instant gratification, but in the end it cannot answer our deepest needs.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 6.

The God of This World

Money has become the god of this world, and materialism is its religion. Materialism is a sophisticated and insidious system that offers temporary security but no ultimate safety.

Materialism, as we define it here, is when the desire for wealth and possessions becomes more important and more valuable than spiritual realities. Possessions may have value, but their value shouldn't possess us: "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income" (*Eccles. 5:10, NIV*). That's the problem with desiring the things of this world: no matter how much we get, it's never enough. We push harder and harder for more and more of that which can never satisfy us. Talk about a trap!

Read 1 John 2:16, 17. What does this text tell us about what really matters?

Read Luke 14:26–33. What is Jesus telling us here, too, about what is of supreme importance for the Christian?

Maybe it could be said like this: those for whom money, or the desire for money, becomes an all-consuming reality should, indeed, count the cost. "And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?" (*Mark 8:36, NLT*).

"When Christ came to the earth, humanity seemed to be fast reaching its lowest point. The very foundations of society were undermined. Life had become false and artificial. . . . Throughout the world all systems of religion were losing their hold on mind and soul. Disgusted with fable and falsehood, seeking to drown thought, men turned to infidelity and materialism. Leaving eternity out of their reckoning, they lived for the present."—Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 74, 75.

People drawn to infidelity and materialism and living only for the present? Sound familiar?

Who doesn't like to own things? The question is: How can we know if the things we own, even if they are few, own us as well? Who alone should own us, and how can we be sure that He does?

Filling the Barns

Read Luke 12:15–21. What’s the message to us here? How might the principle here apply even to someone who is not necessarily rich?

Whether we are rich or poor, our desire to own things can take our minds off what really matters and focus them, instead, on what’s only temporal and fleeting and certainly not worth the loss of eternal life.

We probably never would bow down to a literal statue of gold or silver and worship it today. Nevertheless, we still can be in danger of worshipping gold and silver, just in another form.

This parable is applicable in many parts of the world, where life is dedicated almost exclusively to acquiring possessions. Retailers have turned the hawking of their products into an art form on a global scale. Their marketing strategies are built on making us think that we can’t be happy or satisfied until we own what they are selling. One very successful company created a product, made us think we needed it, and then sold it to us. And the truth is: *it worked!* Even Christians, whose hope is not of this world, are not safe from this deception.

Read Deuteronomy 8:10–14. In what ways can any church member be in danger from the threat warned about here?

What examples can you find, either in the Bible or our world today, that show how the accumulation of wealth and material possessions increased a person’s spirituality, love of God, and desire for heavenly and spiritual things? Please share your answer with the class.

The Allure of Materialism

The advertising world is powerful. Companies spend billions putting images of their products before us. They almost always use beautiful and appealing people to promote what they are selling. We look at those ads and see ourselves, not just with the products but as actually being like the people in the ads.

Materialism would not be nearly as effective if it were not for the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) sensuality woven into the advertising. It is advertising's most powerful technique, but it acts like poison to Christians who are struggling against the dangers of materialism.

Read Matthew 6:22–24. What does the eye represent according to Christian thought and action? How should we as Christians react to the subtle images that tempt us to consume what we really don't need?

Advertising that attaches sensuality to retailers' products can become a powerful tool. Retailers sell their merchandise by creating excitement in the minds of consumers. The experience is pure fantasy, but it works. It can be almost mystical, taking people, however fleetingly, to what seems like another realm of existence. It becomes a false religion that offers no knowledge and no spiritual truth; yet, at the moment, it is so appealing and alluring that many people don't resist it. We want it, and we feel that we deserve it, so why not get it? God alone knows the vast amounts that have been spent, and still will be spent, on things that advertisers have convinced us we need.

“I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16, NKJV). Although we tend to think of the “lust of the flesh” in sexual terms only, what other ways can we be in danger of fulfilling this lust?

Love of Self

“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3, NKJV).

God said, “ ‘Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor’ ” (*Ezek. 28:17, NKJV*). Lucifer deceived himself, thinking he was greater than he really was. When he said in his heart, “ ‘I will be like the Most High’ ” (*Isa. 14:14, NKJV*), he revealed self-ambition, claiming rights that he did not have. Self-deception and self-ambition were two traits of Lucifer’s fallen heart.

These texts about the fall of Lucifer should tell us that, in many ways, the original sin is that of narcissism, which one dictionary defines as “inordinate fascination with oneself; self-love, vanity.” What traits, in any fallen human being, are greater indicators of self-deception than these?

Yet, these traits are more common than one might think. Nebuchadnezzar arrogantly thought he was greater than he was (*Dan. 4:30*). The Pharisees also learned to believe this seductive fantasy (*see Luke 18:11, 12*). Wealth, too, can lead to this same deception if we are not careful.

Read 1 Timothy 6:10. What danger is Paul warning about here?

Paul instructs Timothy to beware of many bad kinds of people (*2 Tim. 3:1–5*), including “lovers of money” (*NKJV*). This love of money can encourage overconfidence and a grandiose attitude of self-absorption and conceit. This is because materialism imbues people who have great possessions with an inflated sense of importance. When one has a lot of money, it’s easy to think more highly of oneself than one should. After all, everyone wants to be rich, but only a very few attain great wealth. Hence, it is easy for the rich to become self-absorbed, proud, and boastful.

Read Philippians 2:3. How does this verse help us understand why materialism, and the attitudes it can foster, are so contrary to the Christian ideal?

The Ultimate Futility of Materialism

There are many people who love God. Their identity is blended with His in a way that material possessions can't dislodge.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6, 1 Peter 2:9, John 15:5, and Galatians 2:20. What does it mean to be God's possession, and where do we find our true identity?

God says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. . . . Without Me you can do nothing’ ” (*John 15:5, NKJV*). The connection is direct and secure. “All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 668.

On the other hand, materialism offers us an identity that is synonymous with our possessions. In other words, we define ourselves on the basis of what we own and what we can buy of this world's goods. James cautions us against this: “Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days” (*James 5:3, NIV*). “To hoard” means to collect and store up many treasures; more important, it is in those treasures, whether few or many, that many find their identity (*Luke 12:19–21*).

Materialism is a form of identity confusion. This means that for many of us, our identity becomes fused with our possessions. Our possessions become our God (*Matt. 6:19–21*). As one person said, “I am nothing without my things.” How sad that we can identify ourselves only through whatever earthly possessions we have. What a shallow, fleeting, and ultimately futile way to live one's life, especially for someone claiming to be a Christian. Do we identify with God or with our possessions? Eventually, it will be one or the other.

How much of your identity is related to the things you own?

Further Thought: “The enemy is buying souls today very cheap. ‘Ye have sold yourselves for nought,’ is the language of Scripture. One is selling his soul for the world’s applause, another for money; one to gratify base passions, another for worldly amusement. Such bargains are made daily. Satan is bidding for the purchase of Christ’s blood and buying them cheap, notwithstanding the infinite price which has been paid to ransom them.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 133.

Buying souls through materialism is the goal of Satan, and the superficial trappings appeal to every heart. Materialism cannot speak, but it knows every language. It knows how to provide pleasure and gratification to both the rich and the poor and cause them to say, “I have all that I need here; why worry about anything else?” Thus, materialism corrupts the mind; it causes people to trust in what they own as opposed to trusting in God. However, the antidote is “ ‘not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty” (*Zech. 4:6, NIV*). Materialism cannot withstand the control of the Holy Spirit when we give ourselves over to God and determine by His grace not to let materialism rule our lives.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are ways in which, even if we are poor or without many material goods, we still can be swept up in some of the dangers we looked at this week?
- 2 Some people say, “I don’t care about money. Money doesn’t mean anything to me.” (Often, the ones who say this have plenty of money anyway.) Why, in most cases, is that simply not true? Finances are important; they do have a role in our lives. The question is: How can we keep money and our need for money in the right biblical perspective?
- 3 “ ‘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’ ” (*Matt. 6:19–21, NKJV*). Read carefully what Jesus says to us here. How is what He is telling us a powerful way to protect ourselves from the dangers of materialism?

Goose Bumps Over God

by ANDREW McCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Truck driver Safan Karamath likes goose bumps.

The small bumps form on his arms when he listens to a sermon. They rise during prayer and when he talks about his new love for Jesus.

“I really feel God’s presence here,” Karamath said, extending a bare arm during an interview at the University of the Southern Caribbean, a Seventh-day Adventist educational institute on the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Small bumps dotted his brown skin.

“This always happens to me when we speak about God,” he said. “I take it as a sign that I am not alone.”

Karamath has felt alone for many of his 53 years.

An only child, his mother died when he was young. He was raised by an alcoholic father in a Muslim community in Trinidad.

“Father was always drunk, so I had to run from him when he came home,” Karamath said. “I relied on myself alone.”

Karamath regularly attended services at the local mosque with the other children. After marriage, he and his wife converted to Hinduism and raised eight children, all of whom were christened in the Roman Catholic Church.

But Karamath still felt alone. As he sought a better way, he gave up marijuana. Several years later, he quit smoking and, sometime after that, stopped drinking alcohol.

Then the goose bumps started. Karamath started attending evangelistic meetings after being invited through a children’s Bible class that the university offers to neighborhood children. Karamath’s children attend the weekly class, which is taught by university teachers.

“The gospel was proclaimed in such a vivid manner, and after 50 years I met the Lord for the first time,” Karamath said.

Karamath and three of his children, ages 12, 14, and 16, were baptized.

Asked whether he would feel like God had left him if the goose bumps stopped, he exclaimed: “No! Never!”

He said he simply sees the goose bumps as a sign that he isn’t alone.

“God is with me,” he said.



A portion of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will go toward a church for the University of the South Caribbean, allowing the university to expand outreach programs such as the weekly children’s Bible class that led SAFAN KARAMATH (left) and three of his children to baptism.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Romans 12:1, 2*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Discern the difference between appropriate appreciation of the material world and possessions on the one hand and the dangers of materialism on the other.

Feel: Experience the spiritual transformation that inspires him or her to worship the Giver of all good gifts rather than the gifts themselves.

Do: Determine to do everything possible to ensure that his or her possessions are used to glorify God rather than self.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Understanding the Purpose of Possessions

A What can we do to guard against the temptation to love our possessions rather than love the One who gives us material blessings?

B What does the parable about the wheat and tares (*Matt. 13:24–30*) say to a world filled with consumerism and commercialism?

C How does our attitude toward possessions influence our self-identity?

II. Feel: Experiencing the Release From Materialism

A How does conquering the love of self foster our victory over materialism?

B How can our release from materialism nourish our spiritual growth?

III. Do: Using Possessions for God’s Glory

A How can our possessions be used to glorify God and improve our world?

B What practical choices can we make to protect ourselves against the temptation to hoard things for ourselves instead of allowing God to use us as channels of distribution?

▶ **Summary:** God gave material blessings for enjoyment and for the development of character. When we use them to honor God and help those He created, we are blessed. When we become materialistic, we lose that blessing.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 12:1, 2*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Being conformed to the world through self-love and materialism interferes with God’s design to transform us by the renewal of our minds.

Just for Teachers: This lesson introduces our study of stewardship. It examines the Christian’s primary stumbling block to faithful service: *materialism*. Materialism, for the purposes of our study, is defined as the preoccupation or emphasis upon material rather than intellectual or spiritual, things. Materialism is not primarily about how *much* one has; it is about a person’s attitude toward whatever he or she has.

Job was an extremely wealthy man with extensive possessions. But he freely offered sacrifices to God and shared his wealth with orphans, widows, and the poor, thus honoring and praising his heavenly Father for his gifts. Contrast this attitude with that of another Old Testament character by the name of Achan (*Joshua 7*). His materialism centered on a garment, some silver, and a gold bar—trivial valuables compared with Job’s possessions. His covetousness, however, cost him his life. Poor and rich alike are susceptible to materialism. Emphasize to your students that one-talent servants and five-talent servants equally are called by God to be faithful Christian stewards.

Opening Activity: Invite class members to imagine that they are five years old again. Ask them to focus their attention on one or, at most, two of their favorite possessions or toys from that time in their lives. Inquire if they still have those possessions. Now determine how many of them lost any sleep last night because they no longer have these items. Enjoin them to share why those childhood treasures no longer hold the importance that they once did. Is it possibly because newer thoughts and wants have replaced their interest in those childhood valuables? Is it because they have matured and now focus their attention on more important things? Paul writes that a divine renewal of our minds overcomes a conformity to this world. Such spiritual maturity makes material possessions seem childish and of no importance.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Stewardship and materialism encompass not only emotional and spiritual aspects of one’s character; they encompass

a mental dimension, as well. Solomon asserted, “As [a man] thinks in his heart, so is he” (*Prov. 23:7, NKJV*). The spiritual transformation proposed by God is brought about through our thinking, through our thought processes. This reorientation of the mind enables us to focus our attention on things above, not on the things of the earth. Thus, while appreciating the material realities of our world, we are released to worship the spiritual reality—the God of heaven—who provided them all.

Bible Commentary

I. The Renewed Mind Protects Against Materialism (*Review Romans 12:1, 2 with the class.*)

In the context of this lesson, materialism is defined as worldly conformity. It is noteworthy that the safeguard against worldly conformity is illustrated as the sacrifice of a material reality: the body.

This sacrifice is described in Romans as “reasonable service” (*12:1, NKJV*). Many more modern translations of Scripture have replaced “reasonable service” with the words “spiritual worship,” a rendering that is well-attested (*AMPC, ESV, NRSV*). The rendering of the *King James Version* (also *New King James Version* and *The New English Translation Bible*) as “reasonable service,” however, is also well supported. Similarly, *The New English Bible* and *The Revised English Bible* speak of *worship by mind and heart*. These translations use wording that emphasizes the role of the intellect. “Reasonable” should not be interpreted in the sense of “acceptable” (for example, “He offered a reasonable price”), but in the sense of “rational” (for example, “He did what any reasonable [thinking] person would do”). The Greek word for “reasonable” is *logikēn*, from which we derive the modern English word *logical*. Thus, the sacrifice of the material is logical, reasonable, a worshiping function of the mind.

Practically speaking, this safeguard against worldly conformity takes place as our minds are spiritually renewed through the absorption of the spiritual thoughts, which replace our worldly thoughts. Paul admonishes the Colossian believers, “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (*Col. 3:2, NKJV*). Christ calls us to seek first His kingdom (*see Matt. 6:33; see also Matt. 6:19–21*), with the promise that the needed things (material necessities such as food and clothing) will be added later. Trusting in the *Giver* of all good things, and not in the things themselves, is the surest protection against the evils of materialism.

Consider This: Think about how much time and energy we invest in thinking about the things of this world compared with the time we spend meditating on heavenly realities. How can the act of presenting our bodies

to God as “a reasonable service” protect us from worldly conformity?

II. The Allure of Human Desire (Review 1 John 2:15–17 with the class.)

The same author who tells us that God loved the world so much that He sacrificed His Son (*John 3:16*) orders *us* not to love the world. “We must be careful to understand what John meant by the world, the *kosmos*. The Christian did not hate *the world* as such. It was God’s creation. . . . But *kosmos* acquired a moral sense. It began to mean *the world* apart from God. C. H. Dodd defines this meaning of *kosmos*: ‘Our author [John] means human society in so far as it is organized on wrong principles, and characterized by base desires, false values, and egoism.’”—William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude* (Edinburg: St. Andrews Press, 1976), p. 56. Obviously, in *John 3:16* the apostle uses the word *world* to mean people. But here, in *1 John 2:15–17*, he uses the word *world* as a figure for worldliness—the everyday materialistic concerns and temptations that militate against the spiritual life.

According to John, this world presents a threefold temptation. The first is the “lust of the flesh” (*1 John 2:16*). Unfortunately, this translation suggests shades of meaning unintended by the original Greek, which simply means inordinate physical desires, including lust, gluttony, and other sinful desires. That is, it is not only something sexual but broader than that.

Similarly, “the lust of the eyes” (*1 John 2:16*) does *not* refer to lascivious voyeurism but, rather, to the desires that the eyes have for all they see (covetousness). In neither case are the things desired necessarily evil in and of themselves. John is simply saying that desiring anything of the human, material world above the spiritual is wrong, even if the thing itself is good.

The “pride of life” (*1 John 2:16, KJV*) or “pride in one’s possessions” (*CEB*) completes the triad of challenges to our spiritual well-being, presented by the world. “Here John uses a most vivid Greek word, *alazoneia*. To the ancient moralists the *alazon* was the man who laid claims to possessions and achievements which did not belong to him in order to exalt himself. The *alazon* is the braggart; and C. H. Dodd calls *alazoneia*, *pretentious egoism*.”—Barclay, p. 58. It is this boastful self-exaltation and lavish ostentation, coupled with a deficient appreciation of the spiritual realm, that John condemns.

Consider This: How does John define “the world” in *1 John 2:15–17*? What is meant by John’s injunction to believers to hate the world? Define what John means by the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life. Why are we enjoined to avoid them?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It is relatively easy to talk about the evils of materialism

but more challenging to weed out its pervasive influence in our lives. An overly commercialized society surrounds us with temptation. Discuss practical ways for Christians to stay heavenly focused while utilizing the material blessings that God has entrusted to them.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ What things can I do to develop a balanced perspective regarding material possessions on a planet that constantly bombards me with consumerism?
- ❷ How might working with poorer people, either domestically or abroad, curb the human tendency toward selfishness?
- ❸ What are the benefits of self-denial?
- ❹ How might living in fellowship with other believers help individuals develop a practical balance of using material blessings without succumbing to materialism?
- ❺ What roles do prayer and Bible study have in protecting the Christian against extremes?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Our use of money speaks volumes about our real values and preferences. People may talk spiritual values, but if you open their credit card statements, the truth comes spilling out. Encourage the following activities as reality checks for class members.

Activities:

- ❶ Track your household expenses for an entire month. At the conclusion of the month, categorize your expenditures. How much was spent in the material realm, including food, clothing, shelter, and, perhaps, transportation? How much was spent on nonessentials, such as entertainment? How much was invested in relieving human suffering? How much was invested in God's kingdom? How much was spent toward personal spiritual growth (for example, spiritual reading, such as the Bible or other Christian literature, Christian music, etc.)? Does your track record suggest that you are materialistic? Spiritual? Unsure?
- ❷ Discuss with close friends or fellow class members ways in which you can pool your finances to invest in a joint spiritual venture. This merger might include an activity such as feeding the homeless, caring for the elderly, assisting neglected children, etc. Discuss specific times and places where you can carry out your activity. Later reflect on how this activity affected your outlook on possessions and how it cultivated relationships with the people you helped and with your friends.