

God *or* Mammon?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Ps. 33:6–9; Matt. 19:16–22; 1 Pet. 1:18; Heb. 2:14, 15; Exod. 9:14; Ps. 50:10.*

Memory Text: “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (*Philippians 2:9–11, NKJV*).

God does not waste words explaining His perspective on excessive obsession with money and material things. Christ’s words to the greedy rich man who, although blessed by the Lord, hoarded and hoarded what he had, should put the fear of God in us all: “ ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (*Luke 12:20, 21, NKJV*).

Serving God and serving money are mutually exclusive actions. It’s one or the other, God or mammon. It is a fantasy to think we can have it both ways, because living a double life will sooner or later catch up to us. We might fool others, maybe even ourselves, but not God, to whom we will one day have to give an account.

We have to make a choice, and the longer we hesitate, make excuses, or procrastinate, the stronger the hold that money and the love of money will exert on our soul. Faith requires a decision.

What should make our decision so much easier is focusing on who God is, what He has done for us, and what we owe Him.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 20.

Christ, the Creator

Read Genesis 1:1; Psalm 33:6–9; Isaiah 45:11, 12; Jeremiah 51:15; and John 1:3. What do these texts tell us about the goodness of the material world?

“It was Christ that spread the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth. It was His hand that hung the worlds in space, and fashioned the flowers of the field. ‘His strength setteth fast the mountains.’ ‘The sea is His, and He made it.’ Ps. 65:6; 95:5. It was He that filled the earth with beauty, and the air with song. And upon all things in earth, and air, and sky, He wrote the message of the Father’s love.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 20.

Material things, in and of themselves, are not evil. Unlike some religions, which teach that the material world and matter itself are bad or evil and that only spiritual things are good, the Bible values the material world.

After all, Jesus Himself created it. How, then, could it be evil? It can, unfortunately, as with all of God’s gifts, be perverted and *used for evil*, but that does not make the original gift evil. The Bible warns against abuse and perversion of the things that God has created in this world, but not against the things themselves.

On the contrary, God created the material world, and He wanted His people to enjoy the fruit and benefits of this world, as well: “And thou shalt rejoice in every good thing which the LORD thy God hath given unto thee, and unto thine house, thou, and the Levite, and the stranger that is among you” (*Deut. 26:11; see also Deut. 14:26*).

Jesus is the Creator (*John 1:1–3*), and the earth is a mere sample of what He has made. His creative ability gives Him a unique perspective on life itself and those who live on the earth. He knows the value of material things, and He knows that He gave them to us for our benefit, and even for our enjoyment. He knows, too, what happens when humanity perverts those gifts, or even makes the gifts an end in themselves, when, as with all things, they were meant to be used to glorify God.

Look around at the incredible bounties of the created world. Even after the ravages of sin, we still can see the inherent goodness in so much of it. What does the created world, in its goodness, tell us about the goodness of its Maker?

Son of God/Son of Man

As Christians, we believe that Jesus was fully God and fully human. This union of the Divine and humanity makes His perspective unique as to what is important on earth and important for eternity. That we can't understand how He could have a divine/human nature doesn't nullify this truth any more than someone's lack of understanding about aerodynamics could cause an airplane not to fly.

"Here are two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus. . . . Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation."—J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 53.

One reason Jesus came to this world was to show us just how loving and caring God is and how much He cares for each of us. Far from being some cold and distant deity, as some believed, Jesus revealed our heavenly Father's true character.

Satan, however, has tried to separate humans from God. He has tried to depersonalize Him, characterizing Him as someone who doesn't care about us. He does all that he can, through whatever means possible, to keep us away from knowing and experiencing the reality of God's goodness and grace. An inordinate love of material things works well as one of Satan's ploys to achieve this end.

Read Matthew 19:16–22. What does this story tell about how Satan can use our love of material things to keep us distant from the Lord?

Imagine Jesus Himself, God in the flesh, speaking to this young man who obviously knew Jesus was somebody special. And yet, what happened? He allowed his great wealth, his love of material things, to separate him from the very person of God Himself. The love of the world and of material things blinded him so that even though he was sad, that sadness wasn't enough to make him do the right thing. He wasn't sad because he was losing his possessions (he wasn't). He was sad because he was losing his soul over those things.

Whether we are rich or poor, how can we make sure we keep the right relationship to the things of this world?

Christ, the Redeemer

Debt is not a principle of heaven. But Adam and Eve sinned, and a broken law meant death. Thus, humanity became debtors to divine justice. We were bankrupt, spiritually insolvent from a debt that we could never repay.

God's love for us set in motion the plan of redemption. Jesus became a "surety" for us (*Heb. 7:22*). It is Christ's identity as the Redeemer that reveals the most important transaction ever made. Only the sacrifice of His life could accomplish the required payment of divine justice. Jesus paid the debt of sin that we owed as justice and mercy embraced at the cross. The universe never had seen or witnessed the display of such wealth as was used in the payment for the redemption of humankind (*Eph. 5:2*).

"By pouring the whole treasury of heaven into this world, by giving us in Christ all heaven, God has purchased the will, the affections, the mind, the soul, of every human being."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 326.

Read each text and list what Christ has saved us from: *Col. 1:13*; *1 Thess. 1:10*; *1 Pet. 1:18*; *Heb. 2:14, 15*; *Gal. 3:13*; *Rev. 1:5*.

The Greek word *tetelestai* in John 19:30 has been called the most important word ever spoken. It means "it is finished" and is the last utterance Jesus made on the cross. His final declaration meant that His mission was accomplished and our debt was "paid in full." He did not utter it as one with no hope but as one who succeeded in the redemption of a lost world. Looking at the cross of Redemption reveals a past event with a present effect and a future hope. Jesus gave His life to destroy sin, death, and the works of the devil once and for all. This means that, although undeserving, we are redeemed (*Eph. 1:7*). To glimpse the wonders of salvation is to tread holy ground.

Christ as the Redeemer is the most sublime image of God. His supreme interest is to redeem us. This reveals His perspective toward humanity and especially how He values a relationship with us. With justice satisfied, Christ turns His attention to our response to His sacrifice.

Think about it: Christ paid the debt, fully and completely, for all the evil you have ever done. What must your response be? See *Job 42:5, 6*.

A Jealous God

In His confrontation with Pharaoh, God declared, “ “ ‘For at this time I will send all My plagues to your very heart, and on your servants and on your people, that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth’ ” ” (Exod. 9:14, NKJV).

What did the Lord mean when He said that “ “ ‘there is none like Me in all the earth’ ” ” (NKJV)?

“It is impossible for the finite minds of men to fully comprehend the character or the works of the Infinite One. To the keenest intellect, to the most powerful and highly educated mind, that holy Being must ever remain clothed in mystery.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 698, 699.

God has no equal (*1 Kings 8:60*). He thinks, remembers, and acts in ways we do not comprehend. No matter how we try to make Him into our own image, God remains God. He is the One who made every snowflake, brain, face, and individual characteristic unique, and “there is no other” (*1 Kings 8:60, NKJV*). After all, He is the Creator, and, as Creator, He is certainly distinct from what He created.

What do these texts tell us about how different God is from His creation? *1 Sam. 2:2; Ps. 86:8; Isa. 55:8, 9; Jer. 10:10; Titus 1:2.*

When we look at all that God is, all that He possesses, and all that He does, it’s remarkable that He could have competitors. And yet, He does, in the sense that He has to “compete” for human love and affection. Maybe that’s why He says that He is a “jealous” God (*Exod. 34:14*). God created humans to be free, which means we have the option to serve Him or to serve anything else. That has been, in many ways, the essential human problem: choosing to serve other gods, regardless of what form they come in, as opposed to serving the only God worth serving, the One who created and possesses all the universe. That’s why He is indeed a jealous God.

What, if anything, in your life is competing with God for your affections?

True Ownership

We belong to God, both by creation and by redemption. And not only do we belong to God, but all our possessions do, as well. We, of ourselves, own nothing other than our own choices.

In contrast, a central tenet of worldliness is the idea that we are owners of our possessions. Yet, this is deception. For Christians to think that they are the ultimate owners of their possessions is to think something contrary to what the Word of God teaches.

God, not we, owns everything (*Job 38:4–11*). We are merely aliens and tenants (*Lev. 25:23*), just as the Israelites were in the Promised Land. We are even dependent on God for our next breath (*Acts 17:25*). What we think we own, He owns. We are but His stewards, and as such we are to manage tangible and even intangible possessions to the glory of God.

List the things from the following verses that God owns: *Deut. 10:14; Ps. 50:10; 104:16; Ezek. 18:4; Hag. 2:8; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20*. **What do these texts tell us about how we should view the material things that we have in our possession?**

“All things belong to God. Men may ignore His claims. While He bountifully bestows His blessings upon them, they may use His gifts for their own selfish gratification; but they will be called to give an account for their stewardship.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 246.

God’s ownership and our stewardship mandate a relationship, one through which He may use us in ways that will prepare us for heaven and that will benefit and bless others. But unfaithful stewards can restrict the Owner’s access to His own possessions. As we saw yesterday, God does not force His will upon us. He created us and gave us possessions in this world to manage for Him until He returns. What we do with them reflects the kind of relationship that we have with Him.

Think through what it means that, in reality, you don’t own any of the things that you possess but that they belong to God. What should that tell you about how you should relate to the things in your possession?

Further Thought: Stewardship, as we understand it, started with God placing Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden home that they were to care for and manage (*Gen. 2:15*). In this perfect environment they were to make the garden livable, a task that could not have been that hard. God authorized their new role and taught them about their responsibility. Taking care of Eden would give meaning and bring happiness to the new family.

The Hebrew verb for “dominion” (*Gen. 1:26, 28*) means “to bring under control and rule.” This was, given the context, not a harsh dominion but a benevolent rule in caring for God’s creation. This responsibility has not stopped. In this environment Adam and Eve were to learn that God was the Owner, and they were His managers, or stewards. From the start God intended that Adam and Eve have positions of responsibility and trust but not as owners. They were to demonstrate to God that they were faithful to their tasks.

“Adam and Eve were given the garden of Eden to care for. They were ‘to dress it and to keep it.’ They were happy in their work. Mind, heart, and will acted in perfect harmony. In their labor they found no weariness, no toil. Their hours were filled with useful work and communion with each other. Their occupation was pleasant. God and Christ visited them and talked with them. They were given perfect freedom. . . . God was the owner of their Eden home. They held it under Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 10, p. 327.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What does the fact that God owns the world teach us about our basic responsibility when it comes to the environment? While we have to avoid the political fanaticism of some environmentalists who all but worship the creation itself, what should our attitude, as Christians, be toward taking care of the environment?
- 2 Dwell more on the idea of God as a “jealous” God. It’s not always an easy concept to grasp, especially because in human terms we look at jealousy as something bad, as something to be avoided. How, though, can we understand this idea as it is applied to God without any of the negative baggage the word usually carries?
- 3 How can we learn to distinguish between the proper use and enjoyment of the physical things that God has created and the abuse of those things? Why is making this distinction so important?

No More Saturday Cartoons

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Adults may speak about the difficulties of adjusting their lives for the biblical Sabbath after being baptized. But what about an 11-year-old boy?

Baptism brought an end to Saturday-morning cartoons for Ronnel Nurse, who lives in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago. It also meant telling his beloved grandmother that he could no longer run errands to the grocery store or do other chores.

Nurse, now a 25-year-old IT consultant for Trinidad and Tobago's Ministry of National Security, requested baptism during a week of prayer program at Maracas Seventh-day Adventist Primary School on the campus of the University of the Southern Caribbean. His single mother, a nominal Adventist, had enrolled him in the school. But his knowledge about God had come from his grandmother, a devoted Christian who took him to her church every Sunday.

"In those week-of-prayer sessions, I found a thirst, or an emptiness, that I never really knew existed until then," Nurse said. "When the speaker made the call for baptism, I had a visceral nudge that told me I should step forward. So I did."

Shortly after his baptism, his grandmother fell ill. She spent most nights in the hospital. Nurse visited her, encouraged her, and let her know that he was praying for her healing. On Sabbaths, he read Bible stories that illustrated God's miraculous work for His people. He believed Jesus would take care of his grandmother.

"So it came as a complete shock one day when I came home from school and my aunt called to tell me that granny had passed away," he said.

Nurse was 12, and he felt that God had let him down. But as he reflected on his grandmother's godly life, he realized that the gospel did not culminate with Jesus' death but with His resurrection and that all who sleep in Jesus also will be raised one day. He made Romans 8:18 his own. The verse reads, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (NKJV).



Nurse, pictured left, who went on to graduate with a degree in computer science from the University of the Southern Caribbean, said he still misses his grandmother.

"But my faith is strong after being in this university and in this church," he said.

A portion of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in first quarter 2018 will go toward a new church for the University of the Southern Caribbean, which has never owned a church building and worships in an auditorium.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Philippians 2:9–11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that God is the Creator, who alone must be worshiped separate from, and above, His creation.

Feel: Appreciate the marvelous love of God displayed through His roles as Creator and Provider.

Do: Worship the heavenly Creator-Redeemer, who continuously displays His love toward humankind through His daily provision.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Divine Attributes

- A** Who is God, according to the divine portrait revealed in Scripture?
- B** What specific roles did Christ assume?
- C** By what reasoning can God claim ownership over our lives?

II. Feel: Jesus Christ, Owner and Friend

- A** How does Christ's dual role as Owner and Friend enhance our relationship with Him?
- B** How does the fact that Jesus created the world affect our appreciation for the created universe and its material components?
- C** How might we enjoy a deeper, more intimate experience with our Creator?

III. Do: Jesus, Object of Worship

- A** How can we demonstrate our adoration of God creatively in ways that reflect His creative power?
- B** How can we effectively share our devotion to Christ with people who do not believe in Creation?
- C** If there is no Creator, what worship options do people have?

► **Summary:** Humankind was designed for worship. That worship may be directed toward self, toward created things, or toward the Creator. Only the last option brings lasting satisfaction, a true sense of belonging in the universe, and a deep sense of purpose.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Philippians 2:9–11*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Humans were created for worship. This impulse is satisfactorily met when worship is directed toward God, rather than toward anything He created.

Just for Teachers: The choice is distinct: One cannot *serve* God and mammon. Mammon in and of itself is not evil. It is not synonymous with Satan or the devil as some have thought. It is an Aramaic word, borrowed by the Greek text of the New Testament, denoting property or wealth. Many modern translations have used the word “money” in its place.

Serving mammon, however, is evil. A popular folk singer dating back to the 1960s once sang, “You’ve got to serve somebody.” So, do we serve a loving heavenly Father who daily provides our needs and many of our wants, or should we choose to serve rock, paper, or metal (for that is what all our “precious gems” and “money” amount to)? Many have accumulated possessions, thinking that they themselves are the masters, only to find that maintaining, repairing, and storing them requires so much time that they are the servants! Our property and wealth, however, are wonderful things when we recognize them for what they are: material blessings bestowed by a loving Creator, given in order that we might distribute His blessings to others.

Opening Activity: Display different types of money before the class. To make things more interesting, and to suggest the universal application of the illustration, include money from other countries if it is available. Talk about the average income in your country and discuss what that amount can buy in terms of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and any extras we have. Focus on the limitations of that income:

- Are there wants that the income cannot supply?
- What do people who have less than the average income do in order to meet their basic human needs?
- Can any amount of money supply the emotional needs for love, belonging, purpose, hope, adventure, satisfaction, wholeness?

Considering these things, how much sense does it make to worship mammon? Conversely, consider God. Ask class members to read the following texts: Psalm 50:10, 11; Haggai 2:8; Matthew 6:31–34; 7:7–11; and John 3:16. Now discuss God’s “limitations,” as well as His generosity

toward human beings. Compare God's assets with our limited incomes. Discuss the emotional needs God can meet that money cannot. In the light of the discussion, from a practical standpoint, why does it make more sense to worship God over mammon?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In formal debates, two opposing teams present their best arguments for their positions and seek to discredit the opposition's arguments against their viewpoints. The most successful debaters not only know their positions but also know the opposition's positions so well that they understand both the strengths and weaknesses.

The current lesson explores the biblical positions or statements about who God is. It claims that God's attributes call human beings to worship. The opposing side alternatively offers the options of self-worship, mammon worship, or Satan worship—anything to divert worship away from the Creator. What are the most important points of the Christian position in support of the assertion that God must be worshiped exclusively? What divine attributes undergird that assertion?

Bible Commentary

I. Creator (Review Genesis 1:1; Psalm 33:6–9; Isaiah 45:11, 12; Jeremiah 51:15; and Colossians 1:13–18 with the class.)

Many commentators recognize that Paul's most developed Christology appears in his Epistle to the Colossians, where he presents the creative and redemptive aspects of Christ. Many scholars believe Paul was writing to counter a budding heresy that contained many aspects of a belief system called Gnosticism. *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* describes Gnosticism as “a generic term for a variety of religious movements of the first centuries of the Christian era. Although the theology, ritual practice, and ethics of these groups differed considerably, all purported to offer *salvation from the oppressive bonds of material existence through gnosis*, or ‘knowledge.’ ”—Paul Achtemeier, ed. (italics supplied), *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 380.

The Gnostics claimed that the material world was inherently evil. This claim presented challenges to orthodox Christian teaching. For example, God could not possibly be the Creator of something so evil as the material world because He is perfect and spiritual (as opposed to material). Given that Christ was sinless, it followed that He could not possibly be incarnate (have a fleshly body) because flesh—a physical, material body—was evil.

Scripture, however, teaches that the material world, because it flowed from God's hand, is good (*Genesis 1*). It repeatedly affirms that God, through Christ, created everything. Because of this, God claims the right to our worship. Based on God's Creatorship, Scripture teaches the essential goodness, apart from sin, of the material world.

Consider This: What does Scripture teach about the material world, and how does this teaching affect our lifestyles and practices? On the other hand, how would the erroneous idea that the material world is inherently evil affect our Christian lifestyle and practices?

II. Redeemer (*Review 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 1 Peter 1:18; Hebrews 2:14, 15; and Galatians 3:13 with the class.*)

God's claim to worship as Creator is tied strongly to the material world. Because He created us as physical creatures and provided the material world for our pleasure, we owe Him our allegiance and adoration. Similarly, God's claim to worship as Redeemer is strongly tied to the emotional and spiritual aspects of our being. Hebrews suggests that Christ's incarnate character—one that enabled Him to fully identify with humanity by adopting a real flesh-and-blood body—is essential to Redemption. The writer sees no essential conflict between the material and spiritual realms. The true conflict is between good and evil, between authentic worship and self-worship.

In the first chapter of Revelation, John proclaims that Jesus is worthy of glory based upon His redemptive work: "To him who *loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood*, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, *to him be glory and dominion forever and ever*" (*Rev. 1:5, 6, NRSV, emphasis supplied*). God's claim to worship is thus two-pronged (Creation and Redemption).

Once Jesus spoke to a Pharisee named Simon, saying, "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." (*Luke 7:41–43, NIV*). Jesus affirmed His assessment. The reasoning is that the one who owes the most loves the most. Believers owe God simply for creating them—an unpayable debt. But how much *more* do they owe because Christ has redeemed them? And on top of that, He daily provides and sustains those to whom He owes nothing. What a wonderful Lord we worship!

Consider This: What is God's claim to worship based upon? Because worship means more than singing and studying at church once a week, how can the believer worship God through the financial decisions made throughout the week?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Emphasize for your students that the Lordship of Christ extends to every aspect of our beings. Introduce the following questions as a means of generating discussion that will encourage believers to surrender all aspects of their everyday lives to the Lordship of Christ.

Application Questions:

- ❶ How does the principle “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (*1 Cor. 6:19, 20, NIV*) inform our decisions and choices?
- ❷ Given that worshiping God extends His ownership over everything we possess, what attitude adjustments must we make?
- ❸ Because honoring God involves caring for the natural world He created, what habits must be changed?
- ❹ How can we assess whether or not we are in danger of loving the gifts more than the Giver? What can we do to protect against giving God’s material gifts the affection that alone should go to God?
- ❺ How can others be encouraged to adopt unselfish lifestyles that channel God’s material gifts for His divine purposes?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: While we cannot serve God and mammon, we can use mammon to serve God. God actually calls us to do this very thing. If we fail to do so, we dishonor Him. In Matthew 25:14–30, Jesus tells a story of three servants who were entrusted with various amounts of money. One received five units, another two, and yet another, one. The owner left, but upon his return he demanded an accounting for the money he had invested with them. Two servants had “doubled their money,” but the third had done nothing. As a result, he was banished. True Christian service requires us to multiply the gifts with which we have been entrusted.

Activities:

- ❶ Plan a God-honoring project to benefit others with money (resources) derived only from the participants. Consult the “Create” sections from the previous week’s lesson for specific suggestions, but do not be limited by them.
- ❷ Write and/or sing songs that uphold Jesus as Creator and Redeemer. Plan a gathering or arrange for a venue where they may be sung or performed, such as during vespers, in a nursing home, et cetera.