

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 worshiping 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 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.