

MATERIALISM

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MATERIALISM

As a clergyman, I am sometimes asked what are the fastest growing religions in the world. My answer may be surprising: "Christianity, Islam and materialism"!

Christianity is without a doubt the first truly worldwide religion. Over one billion people profess Christianity and their number is growing by an estimated fifty thousand per day. The followers of Mohammed number over seven hundred million. Muslims form the third largest religion in both Europe and the United States. But surprisingly, materialism may be running a close third.

Over one-third of all people now live in officially non-religious countries. Almost one billion people do not have any religion and over four percent of the world's population call themselves atheists.

But when I speak of materialism, I am thinking of more than atheism. Atheists are "theoretical materialists". They believe that the material universe is all there is, that there is no God. But hundreds of millions of other people are what I call "practical materialists". They may say they believe in God. They might even oppose "godless communism". But for all practical purposes they live **as if** God does not matter, **as if** this material world were all important.

Practical materialism is the pervasive spirit of our age. The British writer, Aldous Huxley, once said the average Englishman on Sunday morning now bows down to wash his Ford, not to

worship his Lord. And while over eighty percent of Americans favour prayer in schools, perhaps less than thirty percent actually pray at home.

IS MATERIALISM A RELIGION?

It may sound like a contradiction to call materialism a religion, but religion is more than a formal set of beliefs or practices. The word "worship" is actually made up of two words — worth-ship. You worship what you think is most worthwhile. What do you **value** the most? What do you **pursue** the most? What do you **think** about the most? What do you **trust** in the most? Whatever that is, practically speaking, it is your religion. Paul described this mind-set and life-set, "They worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25).

THE FAILURE OF MATERIALISM

I asked a friend not long ago if she had some particular need I could pray for. "You won't like what I say," she answered. "I just want to be comfortable." Her answer dismayed and even frightened me for her. Not that she was a bad person. I was afraid of what her practical materialism would do to her life.

For one thing, materialism produces a **distorted set of values**. Someone imagined a practical joker going into a department store over night and switching all the price tags. The next morning fur coats were selling for five dollars and handkerchiefs for five thousand dollars! That kind of massive switch of values turns our relationships upside down. In many families both parents work, not because they absolutely have to, but to have extra money to buy more things. Mistakenly, they think they can buy themselves and their children what only the giving of themselves can bring. I held a series of

meetings in the affluent northern suburbs of Chicago. There were more Mercedes cars per block than in any place I've ever seen! But that area has one of the highest teenage suicide rates in the world.

Materialism makes us shrink ourselves. It is a truism that we become like what we worship. If we worship a God of truth, holiness, love and beauty, then honesty, goodness, charity and joy will reflect back into our lives. But if we worship things then slowly we become more like a thing, hard, brittle, uncaring.

Furthermore, materialism produces a **society of the unconcerned**. A Paris newspaper said in the 50's French youth wanted to build cathedrals. In the 60's they wanted to bomb cathedrals. Now they simply want a comfortable cottage and a garden at the end of the road. Apathy toward the needs of others and a spirit that says, "Let me alone", may be the offshoots of materialism. That is not to say some atheists don't care deeply. But in society as a whole, compassion is the harvest which grows from the seed of belief — the belief that men and women around us are made in the image of God and therefore deserve our care.

Materialism also breeds a **lack of contentment**. Paradoxically, when we pursue things, they satisfy the least. Like drinking sea water, materialism increases and never slakes the thirst of our souls. The Old Testament Jeremiah recorded a sigh in the heart of God, "My people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and they have hewn cisterns, broken cisterns, which hold no water." An industrialist in a northern Wisconsin town told a young pastor, "You don't see me in

church and you won't see me there until I die.' But when he was dying and the young pastor came to visit him in the hospital, he said, "Young man, I came to America seeking the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I found the pot. But I lost the rainbow."

Finally, materialism offers **neither meaning enough for living, nor hope enough for dying.** In life, the materialist is at a loss to explain how his longing for meaning arose from a mass of molecules. And in death he dies alone, with no Shepherd to walk through the valley of death.

THE ANSWER TO MATERIALISM

At the beginning of the Middle Ages the Christian church had aligned itself with powerful governments and had become wealthy. In reaction to this materialism, monastic orders were formed. Monks fled to the desert and took vows of chastity and poverty in order to escape the sensuality and materialism of a corrupt church and society. Their rejection of material goods (what is called asceticism) was an understandable reaction. But it was a wrong reading of the Bible and ultimately an inadequate solution. Most people could not go and live alone in the desert.

The Bible does not hold out false "spiritualism" as the answer to a false "materialism". Spiritualism which denies the material can be as wrong as materialism which denies the spiritual. In the name of a false spirituality, cult leader Jim Jones told his followers to leave all their goods and follow him. But he led them into disillusion, bondage and a mass suicide in a South American commune. Jones simply substituted the love of power for the love of money.

Instead we need to learn to accept the

created order of things. "In the beginning God . . ." affirms the opening words of the Bible. God, the Creator of Spirit was before all things. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Then "God created man in his own image, male and female." Of all things God created, human beings are the only ones made with a spiritual nature like His as well as material form. "And God said . . . have dominion over the earth." God made us responsible for things.

It is startling to realize that Christianity in one sense is the most materialistic religion there is. The Bible does not say the material world is unreal or evil and that we must escape from it. It tells us that God created this world. "God loves material things. He made them," said the eminent British writer, C.S. Lewis. He has given us things, not as an end, but as a means to glorify Him and to love each other. We should not worship things and we should not disdain things. Instead we should be grateful that "the living God gives us richly all things to enjoy" (I Tim. 6:17).

WHAT JESUS SAID ABOUT THINGS

When God wanted to show us how to live in this material world, He didn't just hand down principles. He actually came to live in this world, in a material body. Jesus Christ is described as "the word become flesh" (John 1:14). He was the word of God who **made** all things and He came to live among us to show us how to use all things. What Jesus taught still makes sense in overcoming materialism.

He taught us to **recognise the symptoms and the disease.** Once He told the story of a very rich farmer who was infected by the disease of materialism (Luke 12). This man's barns were

overflowing and he said, "I know what I'll do. I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I will say to my soul: take it easy, eat, drink and be merry. You have many things laid up for many years." But Jesus said, "You fool, this night you will have to give an account of your soul. Then who is going to get all of these things you have?" That very night the man went into eternity.

To his peers, that man looked like "Mr. Success". To God, he looked like "Mr. Fool". He spoke only of himself — "I, me, my, mine" — and not of God. He thought only of himself and not of others. He was preoccupied with time and forgot eternity. He was so filled with things that he never gave a thought to his soul.

Jesus' powerful story is a mirror in which we modern people should look to catch a reflection of our image. Whether religious or non-religious, we are fooling ourselves into defining ourselves by our possessions? The first step in overcoming materialism is to go to the Great Physician of our souls and allow him to probe and show us where we have become infected with this disease.

Refuse to make things your pursuit. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Do not worry, saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear, for the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly father knows that you need them" (Matthew 6:31, 32). Often today we talk about being caught in the "rat race", but we are not rats. We are persons made for God more than things, for eternity more than time. Say to yourself: I need things, yes, but I will not run after them as if they were my life.

One way to do that is to set a cap both in the amount of time you will spend working for things and the amount of money you will spend buying them. Life demands a balance. Build in time to work, time to play, time to love, time to worship. Don't let work take it all.

Learn the secret of abundant life. That is Jesus' third lesson. When He had told about the folly of the rich man, Jesus said, "Man's life does not consist in the abundance of things which he possesses." On another occasion He said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." Things may always be stolen away by thieves — whether by literal robbers or by time or sickness. Jesus did not come as a thief to take away our joy. Rather He came to give us God's new and eternal and abundant life.

Within each of us, said Pascal, the French philosopher, is a "god-shaped blank". Things can never fill that. Only God can. Jesus did not come only as a teacher. He came to give His life to take the end result of our sin, our pushing of God out of our lives. He rose again from the dead that He might give us the gift of abundant life. "This is life eternal to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent," Jesus said (John 17:3). He died and rose to be the living way through which we can enter into a relationship with God our Creator who alone can fill that emptiness.

Develop an attitude of trust. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Give us this day, our daily bread." An attitude of gratitude and dependence on God is the best antidote for materialism. "Look at the birds of the air," said Jesus. "They do not sow or reap or store away in barns and

yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26). Work is necessary. The birds, after all, have to pick up the seeds. Worry is not. After you have put in a good day's work, trust God to give you, not necessarily all your wants, but all your needs.

Embark on a spiritual adventure. Find God's purpose for your life, one that involves making a life and not just a living. Materialism is overcome by having a greater vision of what God can do with you. "Seek first the kingdom of God," Jesus put it, "and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). When you begin to follow Jesus and to spread His love there will be a fulfillment, such a fulfillment that these things will begin to take their proper place.

A contemporary Christian has written,

"Dear Lord,

I have been rereading the record of the Rich Young Ruler and his obviously wrong choice. But it set me thinking. No matter how much wealth he had, he could not—

ride in a car,

have any surgery,

turn on a light,

buy penicillin,

hear a pipe organ,

watch TV,

wash dishes in running water,

type a letter,

mow a lawn,

fly in an airplane,

sleep on an innerspring mattress,

talk on a phone.

If he was rich, then what am I?"

(William Boice)

The Rich Young Ruler referred to was a young man who came seeking life from Jesus. "Sell what you have, give it to the poor and follow me," Jesus told him, "and you will have treasure in heaven." The young man hesitated, then said 'no' because he was very rich. He missed the greatest adventure of all.

Finally, develop a truly long range direction.

Often our problem is having only short term goals. Jesus told a rather strange story of an employee who was caught cheating. His employer fired him. Before the dishonest clerk left, he called in some customers of his boss who were owing and had them settle their accounts for a few cents on the dollar. After I am fired, he thought, I will need some friends out there! The employer commended the dishonest manager, not for dishonesty, but for his shrewdness. Then Jesus concluded, "The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:8,9).

The meaning of these words of Jesus has been disputed. To me, the sense is clear. Jesus is telling us, "Use your worldly wealth in ways that will bring eternal gain. Invest your time and your possessions to serve God and to help others. You can't take it with you, but you can send it ahead."

In short, do I possess my possessions? Or do they possess me? Are things my servant or my master? My friend, Allan Emery, a very successful businessman, reminisces how his father told him when he was a boy, "Allan, whatever is not a tool becomes an idol." The best way to keep

things from mastering us is to keep them in their place, as tools. We can let things master us so they distort our lives. Or we can use things for purposes that will remind us of what life is really about.

This was Jesus' point when He said, "Where your treasure is your heart will be also."

Part of the answer to materialism is disciplined giving. The Old Testament taught God's people to give ten percent of what they made — off the top. The New Testament taught believers to lay aside a portion of what they had made — the first day of the week. Set aside a solid percentage to give to church and charity — not out of your leftovers, but off the top. The reason we give is not that God needs our money. That is an insult to the thinking person's intelligence. It is because in giving we become more like God whose nature is to give. Then we also become more like what we are created to be.

Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher, had a fascinating parable. A rich man, driving down the road at night with lamps on his carriage to light the way, rode in comfort, ease and safety. A poor peasant, walking down the same road, had a much harder time for he walked in discomfort and some danger. The rich man, blinded by the lamps on his carriage, did not see the stars. But the peasant, with no lamps, could see those stars. The point, said Kierkegaard, is not to do away with our lamps. The point is to see the stars. For us, the answer to materialism may lie partly in selling some of the lamps which encumber our lives. But the real point through Jesus Christ is to know God's love, to enjoy God's companionship, to seek God's kingdom, to see the everlasting stars.

MY DECISION

Believing that the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross for me and is now living, I want this to be my "hour of decision."

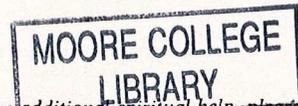
Acknowledging that I am a sinner, I receive Jesus as my personal Savior and will trust in, rely upon and adhere to Him as my Lord.

name _____

address _____

date of decision _____

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