

THE DOCTRINE OF MATERIALISM

I. Introduction

- A. In Matthew 19:16-22, we are introduced to a young man who turned away from following the Lord rather than part with his wealth.
- B. While we may not know how to define materialism exactly, we should recognize it when we see it.
- C. This text is designed to demonstrate that this young man had a materialistic trend within his sin nature that he allowed to control his life.
- D. To see the pervasiveness of the problem we need only consider the sheer bulk of teaching devoted to the issues of money and the details of life in the Bible. Pro. 15:27, 23:4, 28:20
- E. Jesus Christ spoke regularly to the issue of how we are expected to relate to money and the details of life. Matt. 6:19ff; Lk. 12:15,33
- F. His teachings are reinforced by the teachings of the other authors of the New Testament. Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1Tim. 3:3, 6:9,17; Heb. 13:5
- G. The subject of money and matters related to it are found over 100 times in the New Testament.
- H. Someone has even calculated that the New Testament speaks about material matters more than it speaks about the issues of Heaven and Hell.
- I. There is a sense in which the matter of materialism should be considered as a part of basic doctrine since it is so fundamental to the human condition.
- J. As we will see, the problem of wrong attitudes about money and material things is simply the result of allowing the sin nature to dictate, adhering to human viewpoint, and rejecting or failing to apply Bible doctrine.
- K. One fundamental question before every believer is whether or not he or she is going to serve God or money, since **no one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.** Matt. 6:24

II. Vocabulary.

A. Hebrew vocabulary.

1. While there is no specific vocabulary in the Hebrew that deals specifically with the issue of monetary lust, there are some general terms that are used to denote the concept of material greed.
2. Material lust was prohibited in the Mosaic Law. Ex. 20:17; Deut. 7:25
3. Material lust was most certainly the source of the Achan's sin. Josh. 7:1ff
4. It is set forth as a characteristic of the wicked in Proverbs. Pro. 12:12

B. Greek vocabulary.

1. πλεονεκτέω (pleonekteo), verb 5X, to take advantage of someone, used of defrauding, exploiting or cheating someone in terms of money or material possessions. II Cor. 12:17-18
 - a. πλεονέκτης (pleonektes), noun, 4X, one who desires more than what is needed, a covetous or greedy person. Eph. 5:5
 - b. πλεονεξία (pleonexia), f.noun, 10X, the state of desiring to have more than what is due or necessary, greediness, avarice, insatiability.

2. φιλαργυρια (philarguria), noun, 1X, literally, a fondness for silver, the love of money, avarice.
3. φιλαργυρος (philarguros), adjective, 2X, one that has a greedy disposition, one that is prone or known for being fond of money, one that wants to be wealthy.

III. Definition and description.

- A. First, it must be stated that we are not dealing with the general philosophical doctrine of materialism, which means that the only reality, the only causes for what goes on in the world, are physical things and forces that can be detected by the human senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.
- B. Philosophical materialism is opposed to spirituality; it entails the rejection of God, spirituality, and the idea of eternal moral truth.
- C. This doctrine is designed to deal with a specific aspect of materialism, which is part of the lust grid of the sin nature and which expresses itself in the preoccupation with money and the details of life.
- D. Webster defines materialism as *the tendency to give undue attention to material interests, devotion to satisfying the material nature and its desires*.
- E. We would probably define it as the tendency to be more concerned with material issues than spiritual values and priorities. IJn. 2:15-17
- F. The vocabulary terms deal first with the mental attitude sin that arises from the lust pattern of the sin nature, which may or may not always express itself in some overt form or action.
- G. However, Paul makes it plain that the mental attitude sin of covetousness is the unseen root that sprouts into **all forms of evil**. ITim. 6:10
- H. It is one of the few specific sins singled out as grounds for separation. ICor. 5:11
 1. The instruction to withdraw from the monetary reversionist would be pointless if it were not possible to know objectively when a person is consistently engaging in it.
 2. Many believers have serious emotional and spiritual issues with those that commit immorality and other things in this list (and rightly so), but how many instances can you cite of people separating from those that have made money and the details of life a very high priority?
- I. When it comes to the desire for money and material things, it appears to be difficult for most believers in the Laodicean era to see and admit that their own desires can or have become selfish or excessive.

IV. Clarifying the nature of the problem

- A. It should be emphasized at the outset that there is no inherent virtue or spiritual value in being poor.
- B. Poor people may be very wicked, and they may be very materialistic; therefore, what we are dealing with an OSN/STA issue and not an income issue.
- C. Materialism is not a problem limited to the wealthy any more than immorality is limited to a certain segment of society.
- D. Materialism proceeds from the lust grid, and it is just as much a sin for those who have little as it is for those who have much.
- E. In other words, the rich, the poor, and everyone in between, may be equally materialistic.
- F. While ascetic religions (those that renounce material comforts and lead a life of austerity) are those in which the participants are expected to follow a life of poverty, it must be noted that Christianity **is not** an ascetic religion. Matt. 11:19; ITim. 6:17-18

- G. Being a committed Christian does not necessarily involve renouncing worldly goods and taking a vow of poverty; however, it may be the will of God on certain occasions for us to make sacrifices.
- H. On the other hand, neither is there any inherent virtue or spiritual value in being wealthy; therefore, the rich have no advantage with God because of their wealth. Lev. 19:15; Job 34:19
- I. The Bible indicates that riches are not necessarily a sign of virtue; wealth does not suggest that God approves of one's character, nor is prosperity necessarily a reward for one's own personal righteousness. Rev. 3:17
- J. In fact, Asaph noted the wickedness of many of the wealthy: **Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches.** Ps. 73:12
- K. Materialism actually encompasses several related problems.
 1. While the Devil has a number of schemes he can use against believers (Eph. 6:11), none is more pervasive or successful in the last days than getting believers to focus on the temporal issues of life. IITim. 3:2
 2. His schemes involve getting the believer to focus on what he does not have (Gen. 3:1ff); this immediately leads to the spiritual problem of discontent. Heb. 13:5
 3. Further, Satan is apparently a master of stirring up the envy or jealousy grid within believers; this makes them focus on what other people have. James 4:2
 4. Believers may wish they had what others have, or they may wish others did not have what they have; very often believers begin to begrudge others anything that appears to make them happy.
 5. The irony is that if some people spent some time considering these issues, they might realize that they do not actually desire that of which they have become envious or jealous..
- L. Hard work and diligence, which may lead to material gain, is not in itself materialistic; in fact, the Bible speaks of these as parts of an honorable character. Prov. 10:4, 22:29
- M. The sinfulness of materialism has to do with two characteristics that distinguish it from an honorable work ethic:
 1. Selfishness--the primary motivation of the materialistic person is to satisfy himself or herself. James 4:3
 2. Excessiveness--the materialistic person pursues material ends at the expense of spiritual priorities, upsetting the proper balance and proportion God intends in the lives of believers.
- V. The dangers involved in pursuing wealth.
 - A. The New Testament clearly teaches that wealth is not inherently evil; however, it also teaches that the desire for wealth can expose one to some significant risks. ITim. 6:9-10
 - B. In fact, Paul makes it clear that the potential for complete spiritual collapse is a very real possibility.
 - C. Warnings like these, unfortunately, have little effect on some believers at the practical level.
 1. Some believers seem to conveniently define **rich** as a level of affluence above what they have, or above that to which they aspire.
 2. Some believers are more prosperous than those around them, but continue to pursue wealth or more details.
 3. It seems that some are either not conscious of, or willing to acknowledge, their actual status.
 4. This manifests a condition in which the conscience becomes content to ignore the Divine assessment of their continued pursuits for more.

- D. Even though believers have more than they need, some (many) continue trying to elevate their standard of living.
1. When compared with the time in which the Bible was written, believers have so many more details continually paraded past them.
 2. One irony is that few believers suffer from an accumulation of funds since they are more eager to indulge the consumer lust that permeates our nation.
 3. The persistent advertising barrage we endure, coupled with the fact that many things are priced within our reach, make it all too simple to convince ourselves that we really need this one more thing.
 4. Unfortunately, this leads to a situation in which the undiscerning believer plays right into the hands of the sin nature; he fails to watch for the signs that his affections are being diverted by his possessions.
- E. Everybody acknowledges the difficulties of being hungry; too few are honest about the difficulties of being full. Phil. 4:11-13
- F. Believers should not seek a life of poverty; however, if believers understood or acknowledged certain realities, they might not seek a life of wealth. Prov. 30:8-9
- G. One critical danger of wealth is that it tends to cause believers to focus on their money and details, while discouraging faith-rest and gratitude. Prov. 11:28; 1Tim. 6:17
- H. Jesus addressed this issue of earthly treasures and how we are to relate to them; (Matt. 6:21, 19:23-24) nevertheless, some believers naïvely assume that even if wealth is dangerous for others, it is not a real danger for them.
- I. The pursuit of prosperity and the details of life has harmed believers in their moral character.
1. Material motivations and economic pursuits are currently eroding the qualities of character and virtue.
 2. Many believers have glorified the wrong types of people in this world; those making the most money and enjoying the highest standard of living all too often have the worst character.
 3. As Paul indicated, the love of money is a root of **sorts of evils**; it is the unseen root that yields the immoral crops of envy, jealousy, violence, theft, bribery, immorality, murder, and a host of mental attitude, and verbal sins.
 4. Consider the consequences upon the credibility of Lot for choosing to settle in Sodom; the root cause of which was primarily economic advantage. Gen. 13:10-13 19:14
 5. Consider the results of living in Sodom on the moral character of Lot and his family. Gen. 19:16,30
 6. For a good example of the consequences that covetousness has upon a person's character, simply consider the inner character of Judas Iscariot. Jn. 12:6
- J. It has done harm to Divine Institution #2—marriage and family.
1. For the rewards of wealth and the details, many husbands and fathers are expending themselves so completely on their careers that they have little (and in some cases nothing) left to give to their families.
 2. Significant, well-rounded male leadership in the home is rare; many men have given themselves to gaining and maintaining a certain standard of living.
 3. The physical toll often means that they have little left emotionally, physically, or spiritually for their families.
 4. This is foolish since every believer should recognize that the Bible is very clear on the fact that the sin nature is never going to be satisfied! Prov. 27:20, 30:15; Eccles. 1:8
 5. What kind of values are believers passing along to their children when the life is spent gaining and maintaining material things?

6. When believers pursue the material, they can easily undermine what they say about doctrinal matters being the most important things in their hearts and lives.
 7. Believers should be aware that children do not need and will not get everything that they desire; what they do get will be obtained by working, not by whining and manipulating. Prov. 30:15
- K. In some cases, financial applications of doctrine have suffered from wrong material priorities.
1. The pursuit and acquisition of the details can only provide momentary stimulation and happiness, while the true blessings of God actually satisfy the soul. Ps. 145:16; Prov. 13:25; Isa. 55:1-3
 2. The principle by which positive believers are to provide for the support of sound doctrine is found in the doctrine of grace giving. IICor. 9:7
 - a. The verb προαιρέω (proaireo) is used only here in the New Testament and has the force of choosing beforehand, deciding ahead of time; hence, this command first involves deliberation and weighing things out in one's heart.
 - b. One must consider the relative merits of how one puts his money to work; all believers should think carefully about the temporal benefit as opposed to the eternal benefit of investing in God's plan.
 - c. The next two clauses deal with the fact that one must have the proper mental attitude about giving, and not do so **grudgingly or out of necessity**.
 - d. The first phrase indicates that one should not give with reluctance or regret; the thought being *"I will do this, but it pains me..."*
 - e. The second teaches that believers should not feel obligated or pressured and think of giving only as a duty; the thought being *"I am doing this only because I have to or I feel guilty if I don't."*
 - f. The conclusion of the verse is designed to motivate the believer by explaining that God is particularly inclined toward the believer that that is happy to make the correct application.
 3. Some have not recognized that when God prospers believers it is not only for them to enjoy; it is so they may be able to share liberally with others. IICor. 9:8,11
 4. Some believers have less time for the application of doctrine and spiritual sacrifices because they are so occupied with material matters.
 5. While we recognize that work may interfere on an occasional basis, it is a fallacious assumption to presume that work obligations should automatically take precedence over Bible class. Lk. 10:38-42
 6. Believers should not fall into the sin with which Amos charged the Jews of his day; being eager for the days of religious observance to be over so they could get back to making money. Amos 8:5
 7. Those that do not have correct priorities in this area, putting too much emphasis on money and the details, may well miss God's greater blessings. Phil. 4:14; Heb. 10:34

VI. Some suggestions about what we can do

- A. The difficulty is not really that believers do not know what to do about this kind of a problem; one real issue is that some believers will not even acknowledge that there is a problem.
- B. To a believer in America, the most radical suggestion of all would probably be this--put a ceiling on your standard of living.
- C. While the biblical priority for the woman is her work in the household, it may make some sense for a woman to alleviate her husband's load by working a part-time (or full-time) job so her right man can maximize his time for application of doctrine and his family.

- D. Proverbs 31:10ff makes it quite clear that that the godly woman demonstrates the proper industry in her own applications, and also in her charitable functions.
- E. Believers should seek to eliminate debt where possible, living within their means. Eph. 4:28
- F. It is imperative that believers learn to be content, teach this to their children, and not live like the typical Babylonian in the last days. ITim. 6:6-8; Heb. 13:5
- G. Believers can quit giving their children everything they want, teach them the meaning and value of hard work, the satisfaction of doing a job well, and faith-resting God's provision.
- H. Believers must learn to wait on the Lord, pray about things, be willing to be told no by the Lord (what?), and stop assuming that if they can afford it that God wants them to have it.
- I. Believers must learn to distinguish between actual needs and personal greed. Prov. 30:15

VI. Conclusions.

- A. This doctrine is not designed to make any believer feel guilty or apologetic for the measure of prosperity he has been provided by God's grace.
- B. It is emphasizing that maintaining spiritual priorities in a materialistic environment like the one in which we find ourselves can be difficult.
- C. In that regard, the pastor-teacher must seek to curb any tendencies of his lust grid in the matter of money and the details.
- D. It is the responsibility of the spiritual leader to keep reminding believers of the proper priorities regarding money and the details of life. ITim. 6:11, 17ff
- E. For better or worse, others can tell what our priorities really are by how we spend our time and money; at some point, what we are doing speaks louder than what we are saying. IJn. 2:4
- F. It is very easy to give lip service to the doctrine and not follow through in the very practical matters of life, which may betray a lack of discernment toward oneself.
- G. The Scriptures contain a special warning that needs to be heard by all believers. ITim. 6:17-19
- H. We should acknowledge that covetousness/greed is actually a form of idol worship. Col. 3:5
- I. The Lord taught and demonstrated the reality that real life is comprised of so much more than money, the details of life, and material pursuits. Matt. 4:4; Lk. 12:15,23
- J. Eternal wealth should be the first priority of an adjusted believer, and as one man has observed, "*what happens to us in the hereafter depends on what we are here after.*" Matt. 6:19-21; **Stop laying up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But keep on laying up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.**
- K. Peter stresses the value of SG₃ and makes it clear that believers should have their focus on that aspect of God's grace. IPet. 1:13
- L. All believers should pray, as John did, to keep their spiritual priorities in order, wait for God to bless them, and not fall into the trap of pursuing wealth or the details. IIIJn. 2