

LESSON 4

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF MATERIAL THINGS

There is a distinctively Christian view of material things. Christian theology is unique among world religions in its view of the place and purpose of things. The uniqueness centres in Jesus Christ. This Christ-centred view is so radically different that it would be ridiculous to expect anyone to subscribe to it until he has first committed his life to Christ. However, when an individual has experienced the transforming work of Christ in his life, he sees material things in their proper place.

Things find their proper place in the life of man as he accepts Christ as Lord. The entire material creation has its origin, its sustenance, and its purpose in Christ (Col. 1:16–18). Any concept of things that misses this foundational fact misses the end for man's life. This truth does not depend on man's understanding of it. However, for man to gain the benefits of the truth, he must understand it.

The Christian's Struggle for Understanding

The struggle for understanding about the meaning of material things is not new to man. For the Christian this struggle has greater reality because of the unique Christian theology on the subject. The experience of Israel in Old Testament days provides a beginning for Christians. These people did not see life separated into the religious and the secular. For them life was one whole that was dependent on God for meaning. For them God was as much involved in their daily life as He was in their worship activities. They saw both aspects equally related to God.

Christian faith is founded on this same view. Christ did not see the material and the spiritual as two separate kingdoms. Instead, He viewed them as two parts of one kingdom of which He was Lord. Accepting Christ as the Lord of daily life as much as the Lord of worship practices is the key to understanding. Frequently Christians adopt an other-worldly approach to their religion that robs them of the capacity to see Christ as Lord here and now.

Matter is evil—the Spirit is good.

The heresy that matter is evil and the Spirit is good had found its way into the Christian community. This error has prompted much of the other-worldly sense of the spiritual that has hindered many followers of Christ.

The belief that matter is evil was introduced by the Gnostics. The heresy was vigorously opposed by the apostle Paul. His letter to the Colossians is his clear

Man sees material things in their proper place after he has experienced the transforming work of _____ in his _____.

(Christ, life)

The key to understanding that the material and the spiritual are two parts of one kingdom comes in accepting Christ as Lord of daily life as much as the Lord of _____.

(worship, practices)

Is the following statement true or false?

The Gnostic view that matter is evil and the Spirit is good has found its way into the Christian community.

answer to the heresy. Unfortunately, he did not completely remove the gnostic influence on Christian thinking. The corrupting influence remains to this day and continues to compound the difficulty of the believer's search for understanding of God's purpose for material things.

Gnostic thought was founded on the idea that the God who is pure Spirit could not have anything to do with creation, since matter is evil. Just enough of this gnostic distortion finds acceptance in Christian thought to make it difficult for the individual to understand and accept his role as a responsible steward of material things for God.

The material world is against God.

The world hates God. This idea that the material world against God further complicates the believer's understanding of his stewardship. How can he be the steward of a world that hates God? When Jesus said, "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil" (John 7:7, RSV; also John 15:18-19; 17:14), he was not using "world" to refer to material things. He was describing the evil order of rebellious man. "World" is used in at least five different ways in the Scriptures. It may mean the whole universe, or this planet, people in general, a world of sinful men in rebellion against God, or a world that God loved and sought to redeem. These Scriptures do not teach that the physical or material world is against God. It is fallen humanity that stands against God. Jesus asserted, "My kingship is not of this world" (John 18:36, RSV). The wording in *The New English Bible* adds clarity, "My kingdom does not belong to this world."

Christ's teaching offers no criticisms of the material world. His concern deals with man's abuse, misuse, and rebellion towards God. He does not see the physical world of land and trees as enemies of God. Nor does He draw a line between the material and the non-material. What is clear is that His kingdom is not under and cannot be under the control of sinful men. It is not subject to the ways of sin.

Misinterpretations at this point have caused some to draw an artificial line between what they call the spiritual and the material. Biblical faith recognizes no such distinction. To respond in faith to God and to seek His will and purpose is a better description of what being spiritual is all about. This view of the spiritual embraces the idea that serving God calls for following His will—whether this involves the realm of the intellect, the emotions, the cultural, or the material. It is commitment to the will of God that makes life spiritual. Christian stewardship is founded on this concept and anticipates a responsible management of all material things for God.

In search of the spiritual life.

A search for this new and broader meaning of the spiritual life is urgent for the Christian. He must refuse the gnostic heresy of separating the material and non-mate-

(true)

Strike through the incorrect words.

The "world" may mean: the whole universe; other planets; the planet earth; saved people; people in general; sinful men in rebellion against God; or a world that God loved and sought to redeem.

(other planets, saved people)

List four realms which the spiritual view embraces.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

(intellect, emotions, cultural, material)

rial. The search should begin with the assumption that God is the God of both the material and the non-material. The search will find its reward in the discovery that the spiritual life exists in the seeking and doing of the will of God.

Biblical faith does not give a priority to the accumulation of possessions. Neither does the Bible consider the material as important as man. The purpose of God is the clear priority. The issue for the Christian steward in his management of the material is not how much or how little he possesses, but how well he fulfils his Master's will.

How Others Have Influenced Christians

God's perfect order for His creation has not gone unchallenged. The long story of man's rebellion against God and His perfect order and plan for creation begins in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve sinned against God by eating the forbidden fruit. History records the long and tragic accounts of sinful man's perverting the plans of God. From the minds of fallen men have come many concepts of the nature of the material world that have influenced Christians. Sometimes these non-Christian influences have been more life-shaping than have the Christian views. The aim of this section is to evaluate three major non-Christian views that have challenged the Christian position.

Material things are evil.

This is the gnostic view. Gnostics see this universe as a great prison and the earth as a dungeon in which man is a prisoner. The hope they offer to man is that the "inner man" may find release from the bonds of this world. To escape this world is their only hope. James Leo Garrett pointed out, "In Gnostic religion and thought, therefore, man can in no sense be the steward of material things, for his salvation consists of separation from his physical body and the whole material universe." A similar view was held by the Manichaeian religion.

Although Christian theology denounces this heresy, gnostic influences appear in Christian conversation. For a Christian to boast, "We don't talk about money in our church," reflects a feeling more gnostic than Christian. For a member to complain, "I'll be glad when the preacher stops preaching about money and starts preaching the Bible," reveals both a lack of Bible knowledge and a dangerous attachment to gnosticism.

Material things have no value.

This is the conclusion in Hindu and Buddhist teaching. The Hindu refers to the material world as "Maya," which means a "temporary, worthless illusion." The Buddhist would not hold that the material is unreal, but neither would he ascribe value to it. Both groups conclude that the material has no significance to man.

A Christian woman observed, "Wouldn't it be won-

A reward for seeking the spiritual life will be the discovery that the spiritual life exists in seeking and doing the _____ of _____.

(will, God)

Strike out the incorrect answers.

The Gnostic view holds that

- 1. material things are of highest value and therefore good;*
- 2. material things are evil;*
- 3. material things are "the" reality.*

(1 and 3)

The Hindu and Buddhist teachings conclude that material things have _____

(no, value)

derful if Christians could be as idealistic about material things as the Hindus?" She saw the Hindus' aloofness to material things as the ideal. Perhaps she spoke out of disappointment in what she had seen in Christians' lives. Possibly she was unaware of the Christian concept.

Material things are "the" reality.

Western man's concept stands in sharp contrast to the Gnostic's and Hindu's views. He places great significance on the material. For him the material is not only real but valuable. Historically, this concept has its roots in the Jewish and Christian affirmation of the divine creation of a good world. It began with this biblical idea but gradually eroded into something little resembling the plan of God.

Communists have adopted matter as their starting point and have concluded that the world of material things is the supreme reality. They have ascribed ultimate value to the material. Most capitalists would disclaim the Communist assessment that the material is the only reality. Yet by practice, modern capitalism pursues the material as if to say that it is the only thing of value for man.

Bits and pieces of these non-Christian views of the material have found their way into Christian people's thoughts. Their influence has corrupted the Christian ideal and further thwarted the development of Christian stewardship.

Practices the Christian Must Avoid

The Scriptures have repeatedly warned of the abuse of the material by God's people. Both the Old and New Testaments record warnings about the misuse of the material.

Material things are not to become idols.

Israel was instructed not to "make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath" (Ex. 20:4; see also Ex. 20:5-6; 20:23; 34:17; Lev. 19:4; 26:1; Deut. 4:15-19; 5:8-10). Man is not to make a material likeness of anything as an object of worship.

Most Christians readily accept this prohibition about religious idols, but they frequently fail to see that desire to get money and the luxuries that money buys may be idolatry in another form. Paul sounded this warning in 1 Timothy 6:9-10: "Those who want to be rich fall into temptations and snares and many foolish harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and perdition. The love of money is the root of all evil things, and there are some who in reaching for it have wandered from the faith and spiked themselves on many thorny griefs" (NEB²; see also 1 Tim. 6:11-19; Col. 3:5).

Western man and the Communists teach that material things are "_____"

("the" reality)

For the Christian, material things are not to _____

(become, idols)

Is the following statement true or false?

Many Christians fail to see that the desire to get money and the luxuries money can buy may be idolatry.

(true)

Material things are not to be hoarded.

Hoarding is an abuse of the material. Jesus declared, " 'Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' " (Luke 12:15, RSV). Jesus affirmed that man cannot serve two masters; " 'For either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and think nothing of the second. You cannot serve God and Money.' " (Matt. 6:24, NEB). The unbridled pursuit of the material is an act against God. The desire to accumulate wealth can pull one away from the faith (1 Tim. 6:9-10). "Be sure of this," Paul declared, "that no immoral or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Eph. 5:5, RSV).

The Christian who drives himself to get an abundance of things demonstrates no more of the Christian life than does the pagan. Christ sounded the final word on the subject when He asked, " 'For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?' " (Matt. 16:26, RSV). The desire for wealth can so master a professed Christian that this passion becomes a denial of the Lordship of Christ in his life.

The get-rich drive indicates several traits in a man's life. First, he is looking for security in money and not in God. Second, his interest is centred in himself. Third, he is living for self-indulgence and not to fulfil the will of God. None of the traits of one who hoards are attractive (Prov. 28:22).

A wealthy man's estate exceeded four million dollars. His friends said, "He was hoarding four million dollars." The millionaire explained: "I don't care a thing about giving money away or even spending it. I just want to make it and accumulate an estate." He was already past eighty. He and his wife lived in a small house. They lived on income from a row of run-down houses they rented. They limited themselves to this income so they would not have to touch their treasured holdings.

Getting money was this man's life. He always found some polite way to refuse worthy appeals for help. When asked what he would do with his money, since he could not take it with him, he would laugh, "I just won't go where I can't take it!" But he did. Now the money provides a luxurious life for his nephews. He did not want them to squander the money, but his hoarding ways prevented his giving it to a better cause.

It is not always easy to distinguish between saving and hoarding. Most Christians today believe they have a responsibility to save if they can. This assures their continuing ability to fulfil Christian goals. At this point of purpose, a major distinction between saving and hoarding is found. The committed believer will examine his motives to assure that his savings are in proper balance with generous giving, and to assure that he is not simply seeking wealth.

Is the following statement true or false?

Hoarding is not an abuse of the material.

(false)

List three traits found in the life of one who follows the "get rich drive."

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

It is not always easy to distinguish between _____ and _____.

(saving, hoarding)

Material things are not to have ultimate value.

Material things are important and essential. They are not eternal. Possessions are not to be viewed as the supreme value of life. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth. . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:19–20). There is an interesting play on words in this advice of Jesus. He was saying, "Treasure not to yourselves treasures of earthly things, but treasure to yourselves treasures in heaven." The priority in wealth is to be rich towards God. The rich fool is the classic biblical illustration of one who became wealthy in material things and yet poor before God (Luke 12:16–20).

Material things are not to be belittled.

"The earth is the Lord's" (Ps. 24:1). The Christian must remember that this is his Father's world. Christians, all people, should not speak disparagingly of their world. Nor should a false otherworldliness rob them of their responsible management of this material world for God.

Luther Powell, in his book *Money and the Church*, stated: "Too often money has been looked upon as a thing of evil. For instance, due to the abuse in financial matters just prior to the Reformation, some of the reformed churches forbade taking an offering in the church. The offering plates were kept in small shelters just inside the church gate."³ The offerings were separated from the worship services as if to suggest that money was a necessary evil. The church had to have money but mistakenly felt that giving it was not a vital part of worship.

The Christian View of Material Things

The Christian view of material things is unique. Only the Christian religion has a sound view of the material. It offers the only hope for the material world to be reclaimed for its divine purpose and therefore for the good of man. In this day of pollution and shortages, the acceptance and practice of this unique view is urgent.

It is not possible to write a simple and completely definitive statement of the unique Christian view of the physical world. Yet it is possible to identify the major distinctions of this Christ-centred view. This requires taking the best of biblical truth and using the insights gained to guide the sincere believer.

The purpose for the material is found in Christ.

The material finds its purpose in Christ.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things

While material things are important and essential, they are _____.

(not, eternal)

When the Christian remembers that this is "my Father's world," he will not belittle _____.

(material, things)

Is the following statement true or false?

Since only the Christian view holds that the material world should be reclaimed for its divine purpose, it is unique. _____

(true)

The material finds its purpose _____.

(in, Christ)

were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:15–17, RSV).

The Christian view of the material is founded on three distinct claims made in this passage:

1. The material world was created by Christ. All things have their origin in God through Jesus Christ.
2. The material world was created for Christ. This was the purpose of creation.
3. The material world is held together by Christ. This describes the dependence of man and matter on Christ.

Christ is the beginning of creation, the goal of creation, and the unity of creation. All things find their purpose in Him. Paul is the major source of our interpretation of the person and words of Jesus. His letter to the Colossians was his answer to the gnostic heresy as he gave us this Christ-centred understanding of the role of material things.

Paul outlined the great organizing principle of life as he asserted that all things began in Christ and come together in Christ for their purpose. Paul revealed that this had been the plan of God from the beginning. "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9–10, RSV).

Such a Christ-centred view leaves no place for the idea that the material is opposed to the spiritual. The material is not the enemy of God. Jesus Christ became God in matter. This is the idea of the Incarnation—God became flesh. If the material were evil, it would not have been possible for God to make this entrance into matter. But Jesus did enter the created world to redeem it, to reclaim all creation for God. It is only in a personal relationship to Christ that one can comprehend the real purpose for the material world.

The Christ-centred view gives fresh meaning to the Christian's salary, his business, his holdings, his home, and his motor car. It leads to this simple acknowledgement, "All that I possess was made possible by the creating Christ, and it is all in my possession as a trust from Him."

The Christian view places value on the material.

That God takes this world seriously and sets great value in it is a mandate that His people respond in like manner. The believer's life is not to be a search for escape from the material but a commitment to use it as an expression of his faith. Money has value to the Christian. It allows him to translate himself into help for the hungry and needy.

Is the following statement true or false?

The Christian view rejects the idea that the material is opposed to the spiritual. _____

(true)

The Christ-centred view leads the Christian to acknowledge "all my possession is a _____ from _____."

(trust, Him)

The Christian life is not negative. Paul denounced “Do not handle this, do not taste that, do not touch the other” as false piety. He added, “It is of no use at all in combating sensuality” (see Col. 2:21–23, NEB). He also condemned those who forbid marriages and the eating of certain foods. He settled the matter with a note of finality, “God created everything good” (see 1 Tim. 4:3–6).

It is abuse, not use, that must concern the Christian. It is not Christian “using” that drives man to pollute the atmosphere and destroy the land and water; it is abuse. It is an abuse of God’s purpose and man’s stewardship. Unfortunately, some ecologists have blamed the Judaic-Christian tradition for man’s rape of the earth. Nothing could be farther from the respect and value Christians should assign to the material.

The Christian view calls for the material to be received with thanksgiving.

“For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:4). The Christian not only recognizes that material things are good when used for God’s purposes, but he further recognizes that he is to receive them with thanksgiving to God. Material things are to be enjoyed. Real enjoyment requires grateful acknowledgement that God is the gracious giver. Man is cautioned: “ ‘Beware lest you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth’ ” (Deut. 8:17–18, RSV).

The Christian view recognizes man as the responsible manager.

The Christian steward is to live the responsible life. He begins with an acknowledgement that God is Lord and owner of all. He then acts on the assurance that his God is gracious to provide and to guide. He carefully handles all things because the final goal is what God wants done. The Christian steward approaches life from a Christ-centred view.

Notes

¹ James Leo Garrett, “A Christian View of Material Things,” *Resource Unlimited*, ed. William L. Hendricks (Nashville: The Stewardship Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1972), p. 88. Used by permission.

² The Bible verses in this book marked “NEB” are from *The New English Bible*. © The Delegates of the Oxford University Press, and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1961, 1970. Reprinted by permission.

³ Luther P. Powell, *Money and the Church* (New York: Association Press, 1963), p. 230. Used by permission.

Is the following statement true or false?

The Christian life is not negative, and it places value on the material. _____

(true)

In the Christian view, the material is to be received with _____

(thanksgiving)

In the Christian view, man is the _____

(responsible, manager)

The final goal is what God _____

(wants, done)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). Read the study guide text and answer the following questions.

1. When does man see material things in their proper place? _____

2. What is the key to understanding God's ownership of both the material and the spiritual kingdom?

3. What heresy does the Gnostic belief promote concerning matter? _____

4. In what five ways do the Scriptures use the word "World"? a. _____
_____ b. _____ c. _____
d. _____ e. _____
5. What does the biblical view of the unity of the spiritual and the material world embrace? _____

6. In searching for the new and broader meaning of the spiritual life, what is the reward? _____

7. List three major non-Christian views that challenge the Christian position.
a. _____ b. _____
_____ c. _____
8. While most Christians readily accept the biblical prohibition against making religious idols, what do they frequently fail to see? _____

9. List three traits the "get-rich drive" indicates in a person's life. a. _____
_____ b. _____
c. _____
10. Name four practices related to material possessions Christians need to avoid. _____

11. How does the unique Christian view of the material offer hope for the material world? _____

12. How did Paul outline the great organizing principle of life? _____

13. What areas of the Christian's life are given fresh meaning through the Christ-centred view? _____

14. What four truths should be included in the Christian's view of material things? a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____
15. Why must the Christian carefully handle all things? _____

16. Read pages 75-84 in *God's Miraculous Plan of Economy*.
17. Write a sermon or Bible lesson on one of the following topics. (Give scriptural references. You may use material from Dr. Taylor's book.)

"God's World: Man's Use and Abuse of It"
 "Material Things — Right and Wrong Views"
 "Idols in the Christian Life"
 "Thanksgiving — The Cure for Greediness"

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3). After reading pages 75-84 in *God's Miraculous Plan of Economy*, do the following.

1. List the phases of God's cycle of sufficiency and give a brief description of each.
2. How may a Christian know when he has too many material possessions?
3. List four guidelines to help determine what is a good work.

Advanced activity (Level 3).

1. Compare Taylor's "Abounding in the Manner of It" with Ray's "The Christian View of Material Things." In what ways do the authors agree? In what ways do they disagree?
2. Write a paper of at least one page defining, explaining, and supporting the statement by Taylor: "God is willing to allow you to have as much as you will determine to use to glorify his name and extend his kingdom." If you disagree, support your view.
3. Illustrate God's cycle of sufficiency as suggested by Taylor. Perform the activity on page 84.

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the heresy that "matter is evil — the Spirit is good."
2. How have others influenced Christians concerning the material world?
3. Contrast the Christian view and that of the Hindu and the Buddhist concerning the value of the material.
4. Discuss the likeness and the contrasts in the Christian and the Communist view of material things and reality.
5. If you have Level 3 students in your Seminar, ask them to share number 1, Advanced Activity with the seminar group.
6. Discuss Dr. Taylor's statement: "God is willing to allow you to have as much as you will determine to use to glorify his Kingdom."