

# 7 AN UNPLEASANT REALITY: MATERIALISM IN THE CHURCH

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## IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THE FOLLOWING:

- *A Possible Caveat*
  - *Origins of Materialism in the Church Body*
  - *Envy and Greed in the Modern Church Body: A Notorious Cause of Division*
  - *Does God Care About Our Assets?*
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## A POSSIBLE CAVEAT

Maybe this all sounds good to you, but you hesitate to make a commitment to Christ based on one glaring reservation: materialism in the church. Yes, it does exist, and we wish it did not. But the church is made up of people, and people often fall short. We may misinterpret Scripture, perhaps with the best of intentions, or we may knowingly pervert it for our own benefit.

Such error is not new. The misinterpretation of Scripture led to all manner of horrors during the Spanish Inquisition and the western expansion of manifest destiny during the United States' early development. We cannot guarantee that such foibles and crimes will not occur again. Some churches simply get it wrong. Their heads are in the right place, but their hearts are not, or vice versa. But this does not mean we should turn our backs on God's standards. God transcends all the problems of humankind, even those of His church. His nature is not defined by our actions, but impressionable nonbelievers may certainly think it is revealed by them.

Many Christians have misrepresented Christ for selfish reasons. They are vulnerable to the same materialistic temptation as anyone else, treating others as commodities and misusing Scriptural references to financial

stewardship to defend their behavior. Although Scripture teaches that we cannot take our wealth with us, many Christians become obsessed with storing up worldly treasures, even at the cost of evangelism and discipleship. Legions have left the church over this issue, and many more have steered clear of it.

## **ORIGINS OF MATERIALISM IN THE CHURCH BODY**

The origins of materialism in the church could probably be traced back to the Crusades and medieval Europe, when the Catholic church sponsored campaigns of violence and bloodshed to “reclaim” the Holy Land and biblical artifacts. While these raids were conducted ostensibly under religious pretenses, the real motivations were political power and gain. The Catholic church considered itself the one true church; thus, whatever the church wanted to claim was viewed as rightfully belonging to it.

Jesus called His followers to go into the world, to let their light shine before men, and to tell all people about Him. We are to tell what we have seen, heard, and experienced, and to love others as He loved us (Matthew 28:18–20). The church, blinded by greed and ambition, conveniently missed this instruction. Manifest destiny, coupled with coercion, replaced the church’s true evangelical calling.

## **ENVY AND GREED IN THE MODERN CHURCH BODY: A NOTORIOUS CAUSE OF DIVISION**

Covetousness is a major problem in the contemporary church. The world values money, status, and possessions, but these concerns have no place in an eternal perspective. However, rather than emphasizing eternal kingdom matters, many Christians become jealous of each other and use status markers to identify themselves. Just recently, an article appeared in a Christian publication, written by a respected Christian financial authority. It spoke of savings and investments and planning for the future, but did not mention God once. This article would have been a great opportunity for the author to discuss stewardship of what rightly belonged to God, but he missed that opportunity.

We too often try to serve both God and money, but Jesus teaches that this is impossible (see Matthew 6:24). Frequently, we bring our worship

of money into the church. You may have seen it: men and women dressed extravagantly and adorned with jewelry. They drive into the church parking lot in expensive vehicles and take prominent parking spots so all who enter and exit the area will see them stepping in or out of their vehicles. When the offering plate is passed, they make a show of writing checks or thumbing through one hundred dollar bills. They talk only to those dressed like themselves, and visibly have it “all together.” With shifting glances, they pretend not to see newcomers or the unbathed homeless person nervously sitting in the back corner. They may have placed a small fortune in the offering bucket during the collection, but missed perhaps the most available opportunity to show their love and obedience to the Lord by helping a neighbor in need.

On the other side of the spectrum are those embittered by the privilege they perceive others to have. Envy is a powerful, evil force that has broken long-standing friendships and caused dissension in the church. Envy leads to unfair accusations. For instance, we may see someone “living large” in church. We may judge them to be hypocrites because they have so much while others are destitute. We may not realize these persons give generously of their income—more than they can comfortably bear—and the Lord has blessed them with further material wealth. They wear nice clothing and jewelry, but in their hearts are pleased to serve God with any blessings He gives.

We must be careful not to judge others for being “richer” than we are or envy their blessings, for God blesses us in myriad ways. Our envy can blind us to blessings in our own lives. Scripture teaches us we can take none of it with us:

Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” ‘ “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ “This is

how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:15–21)

If others in the church have more material wealth than we do, what is that to us? God knows their hearts, and if their love is for their wealth, He will judge them as He sees fit.

## **DOES GOD CARE ABOUT OUR ASSETS?**

God cares not one whit for our earthly possessions and treasure. He will judge what we have done during our time on earth, how we have used our resources to honor and serve Him and to serve those in need. Wealth used only for personal gain serves no one, least of all ourselves. Psalm 49 illustrates the blessing of those who seek the Lord as opposed to those who seek wealth, and perish.

We can find copious examples of materialistic extremes in the Christian church throughout history and probably use them to justify any number of accusations against it. Our anger against people of the church would be justified. To level these claims against Jesus, however, would be false and misdirected. He is the true head of the Church.

## TO HELP YOU LEARN

Please complete the following statements in Part A. Then Answer the questions in Part B. You may write in your book or on separate paper. After you complete this assignment you may compare your answers with the correct answers provided in the section titled “To Help You Learn—Answers” in the back of this book. Completing this part of Lesson 7 will help you remember the important truths of this lesson.

### A. COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING

1. The church is made up of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ often fall short.
2. God’s nature is not defined by our \_\_\_\_\_.
3. In earlier church history, manifest destiny and coercion replaced the church’s true \_\_\_\_\_ calling.
4. Frequently, we bring our worship of \_\_\_\_\_ into the church.
5. To level accusations against Jesus that should be aimed at problems in the church would be \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

### B. ANSWER BRIEFLY

1. What are examples of how greed and envy manifest in the church? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Can you identify the important ingredient so often neglected and missing in the early church’s crusades?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Why does so much envy and covetousness exist in the church today? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*THE COUNTERFEIT WEALTH*

4. Is personal appearance an approximate indicator of where a person places his or her value and trust? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Why is it false to accuse Jesus of the same things we so often accuse the church? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_