

Series: Take Good Care

Sermon: Materialism

Text: Matthew 6:19-21; 31-34

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Date: 2.11.24

PLEASE NOTE: *Due to technical difficulties, there was no online service broadcast on February 11, 2024. This means there is also no video record of the sermon preached on this date. For this reason, we are providing Pastor Jeff Krajewski's notes for this particular sermon for anyone who wishes to review. We apologize for any inconvenience.*

We are asking, “How do we continue to grow into full mature followers of Jesus?” and “What are the barriers that prevent us from that maturity?” We are trying to put into practice Jesus’ instruction to grow up while paying the caution from the Apostle Paul in **Romans 12:2 slide**

And a primary place for us to take good care is in our stewarding of our stuff, the material resources that we have been given care over. What does it look like for us to be good stewards of the material possessions that we have? We were given a vision in the beginning. That is why we started with our origin story of creation. It was here that we noticed that God created an abundant and life giving world that was full of everything that we needed to thrive as humans. Working the land and caring for creation was our primary vocation and the work was light and there was joy in all that we were created to do. There was never a sense that anything would run out in this reproducing and multiplying world. There would always be enough because, in God’s presence, we would know how to say enough. God created paradise and then He created humans to enjoy and to take care of this place. That is the proper order of creation, in the beginning.

We now live outside of that paradise, east of Eden, in a creation that is working against us, making it difficult for us to produce and sustain life. The Bible says that the creation actually groans for redemption and we also experience the painful effects of that groaning. Creation isn’t just working against us but we are also working against each other. There is no mutuality or interconnectedness such that we would naturally think that your success is my success and your failure is my failure. And that would especially extend to our stuff, the material things that we have. This is mine, says every child who walks into our 2’s and 3’s room. We start very young as possessive materialists. In fact, this is the water in which we live. This may be a feature of our culture rather than a universal human truth because we live in one of the most resource rich and wealthy

countries that the world has ever known. Without a sense of boundary or limit these resources can lead us to a possessive materialist mindset that becomes a barrier to our transformation as whole and mature persons in the image of Jesus. Whether this is a universal human problem or a modern western problem, it is definitely something that we need to pay attention to.

A few of the ways that materialism is defined by Webster is...

- **A preoccupation with or stress upon material rather than intellectual or spiritual things.**
- **A doctrine that the only or the highest value or objectives lie in material well-being and in the furtherance of material progress.**

Consider how we assess the good life in our culture. What are some of the markers we use to determine success? When things are going good or when we are “struggling”, how often is it attached to material goals? Our professional success or lack thereof is often tied to financial advancement. We are better than we used to be because someone is paying us more. Fundamentally, materialism is a way of life. It is a philosophy for how we order our “lived” values. We can say we follow Jesus and sing about how all we need is Jesus but the truth is that we often have our security, our happiness, our future hopes and dreams and our disappointment and fears tied closely to our money.

But why is this a potential danger to our ability to mature in Jesus’ vision for us? Why should we even care? We live in a resource rich world, why shouldn’t we enjoy all of the things that are available to us? I love kitchen gadgets, what’s wrong with that?

I’m going to start with one of many teachings of Jesus in the Gospels.

He says, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

And then He tells a story of a wildly successful farmer who had such a good harvest that he didn’t have enough space in his barn to store all of the grain and so he built bigger barns. And Jesus calls him a fool. That is a conclusion that doesn’t make any sense in our world. That guy would be held up as an example of how to manage God’s blessing. Where’s the problem? He’s a farmer, he did good work, why would Jesus call him a fool? Why is there a problem with a hardworking farmer who had great success at the work that he was created to do? I’m not sure that’s the problem. Look at what comes after the harvest.

18 “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. 19 And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.””

What’s the problem? Look at the number of personal and possessive pronouns. I did this, this is mine, I will save it so that I will be taken care of. **He** is the center of the story. He has been captivated by the spirit of materialism and consumption such that he doesn’t think of anyone else or acknowledge how he came to be such a successful farmer.

Jesus says that this is something that we should be guarding against. In fact, this is such an important and potentially dangerous barrier that Jesus says in Matthew 19 that it is incredibly difficult for people who have built their lives on their wealth to even experience the kingdom of God.

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” 25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” 26 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

This is sobering and why we should pay special attention to how we relate to our wealth. But we also have to balance this. We live in a material world. We need food, clothing and shelter. These are things that we need to live and exist and we need money in order to get these things. It’s true that we can become captive to the material but the material world is not evil in itself, in fact, it’s the opposite. The earth is the Lord’s all that is in it is His and it is good. The challenge is learning to relate to and use these good gifts for what they are. God wants us to experience the abundance of His creation. I love to cook and I enjoy traveling. These are not evil desires. What we want is good, God placed those desires in our hearts. It’s not wrong to want nice things or a job that you love and housing that is comfortable. We have to find a way to appropriately relate to the material world.

Yet, we live in a world that is constantly pressing on us to go to the extreme and in fact shames us when we don’t want more or have the newest or nicest things that are available to us. There is the pressure that comes at us from all sides to conform, to

advance, to level up, to compare ourselves to others and to view our own value through this materialistic lens. Our world is set up as a materialistic machine that makes consumers out of us.

When we don't recognize the danger of our materialistic culture we are in danger of becoming so well adjusted to it that we fit in without even thinking about it. Here are a couple of dangers that I have noticed in my own life, tendencies that I can easily fall into when I am not watching out.

Materialism replaces God as the primary provider for humans. I am easily swayed into thinking that I am in charge of my life. And when I do that, in this world, that means that my primary source of security is money. I have an app on my phone that I have recently removed because it shows me where my retirement account stands, on a daily basis. And on a daily basis I find myself either feeling a bit more secure or anxious about our future. And yet, Jesus says, that how the pagans live because they don't know that they have a heavenly father who wants to take care of them. And I find myself, regularly, to be a confessing Christian pagan. Materialism becomes a god for those who don't know God and can also be a god for those who do.

Materialism values the wrong thing, necessarily devaluing the best thing and turns us into consumers rather than neighbors. As Randy Alcorn writes, "We were created to love people and use things but materialists love things and use people." We were not made, as a primary expression of our purpose, to consume the material world but to use the material to expand and extend God's goodness in creation.

Materialism and the consumer identity also isolates us and reduces what it means to be human to individuals with appetites to be satisfied. Our desires get fed by the wrong thing and therefore need more and more to be satisfied. It's not that what we want is wrong or that we shouldn't be able to enjoy good things. It's that this becomes the end in itself.

Materialism also denies the mutuality of humankind and creation. I am not thinking about others when I have been taken captive by a materialist mentality and if I do, I am only thinking about them as adversaries or impediments to getting what I want. And we are reduced to human resources whose primary usefulness is to keep the material machine in motion. And our reward? Maybe a raise or a bonus or stock options.

I wonder how the story of the farmer would be told through a person who had a vision of God's kingdom of mutuality? He would have seen his increase as an opportunity to bless and share. The earth was created so that everyone has enough and no one goes without. And I would contend that this spirit of material mutuality will lead to a posture of generosity and joy in sharing with others.

The bottom line is that the difficulty of accumulating wealth as a primary way of thinking about our lives is no less challenging to our spiritual formation than it was in Jesus' day. We have to watch out, our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions. I don't want to overstate this but how we handle our possessions may be one of the most central components of our spiritual formation. Richard Foster says it like this in *Celebration of Disciplines*:

Jesus speaks to the question of economics more than any other single social issue. If, in a comparatively simple society our Lord lays such strong emphasis upon the spiritual dangers of wealth, how much more should we who live in a highly affluent culture take seriously the economic question.

Jesus offers us another option in the sermon on the mount.

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus says that what we treasure, what we long for and lean on and worry about and guard is where our hearts will be found. And when that is our money, no matter how much or how little of it you might have, when it is our primary sense of identity and security, this indicates that we do not believe that we have a heavenly Father who loves us and promises to take care of us.

So what do we do? How do we return to our true identity as image bearers and caretakers in a world that is so consumed with wealth and things? We go back to the beginning to remember who we are. What did we learn about the origin story of our humanity? We are idols of a God who knows when to say enough. And we are more than the beasts with the capacity to say no to limit ourselves and our desires when they are out of line with God's best for us. We can practice self-control and we can trust God. throughout the history of the church, the discipline that helps us to deny the cultural barrier of materialism is the practice of simplicity.

Simplicity is the countercultural practice that helps us to detach ourselves from the false god of materialism and experience the joy and freedom of attachment to our Creator God.

Simplicity, at its simplest, is a detachment from worry and anxiety. Therefore, simplicity is not first about what we do with our stuff but first an inward journey in our attachment to God. Rich people can be fully satisfied and confident in God as their provider and those with very little material possessions can be obsessed with stuff. And when the outward expression is not motivated by an inward transformation of our hearts then we will go to extremes. We will either dismiss Jesus' words altogether or we will assume that forced poverty is the only real way to go. Neither of these are rooted in God's story. Jesus helps us to reattach ourselves to God in the Sermon on the Mount.

31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.
33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

I'd like for us to consider three principles of simplicity and how our pursuit of this wisdom from God can transform our lives from

Ownership - The earth is the Lord's and everything in it

Attitude - God has given us these resources and is taking care of them and us.

Access - We freely and joyfully share the resources that God has given us.

The first principle reorients us to God, His creation and the gifts that are the material things that we have. It shifts ownership from us to God. For example, if you allow me to borrow your car, I won't immediately go out and get it painted the color that I like. It's not my car, I don't have ownership of it. This attitude shift recenters the material world to the rightful owner. We are stewards, we are caretakers of the good gifts of creation and everything that we have is a gift. As we detach from ownership and our attitude shifts from trusting in the material to trusting in the Creator of the material world then we can begin to think about our stuff through the lens of God's care and love for us.

Jesus has a number of different parables about what this means and what our attitude should be in our role as stewards. And the basic premise is that we should take care of the creation in a way that is consistent with the intentions of the owner. We are given dominion over the creation in the beginning and humans have turned the instruction of caring for and protecting creation into domination over creation. The principle of the garden is that there was plenty to go around and that this garden would expand under the care of the humans as they were fruitful and increased in number.

And when we know that the things we have are God's and that God wants us to practice self-control and careful stewardship with what we have then we will gladly share with those around us. Our attitude toward our stuff changes when we know that we have a good Father who sees our needs and will take care of us. Anxiety, fear and storing up are replaced with joy, security and generosity.

And that will come, Jesus says, when we seek first the kingdom of God and righteousness.

How do you seek first God's kingdom? What are some practical ways that you could seek first God's kingdom? Maybe you're like me, a confessing Christian pagan who often attaches my securities and anxieties to my stuff. I'd like to invite you to take some time this week and consider what a step toward simplicity could be for you.

Maybe the process begins by reflection on your own story and how your relationship with money emerged in your life. How was it talked about in your home growing up? What were the first emotions that you can remember being attached to money? Were they positive or negative? How has your story developed and changed over time?

And then, maybe try sitting with this passage for a week, reminding yourself that God loves you and wants to care for you. Meditating on this passage, considering how your life is aligned or misaligned with this vision and asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what one step toward simplicity could look like? Where is God inviting you to seek Him first? I wonder what the Holy Spirit might say to us if we took this seriously for a week, that we intended to hear the voice of God through the words of Jesus and respond to His invitation and move toward the goodness of God's kingdom.



That has been my prayer for us this week, that we would be reminded again of just how much God loves and longs to care for us. We can trust Him and enjoy the world that He has made for us to live in.

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can. John Wesley