



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

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### **When Material Things Become a Spiritual Matter Luke 12:13-34**

For us who claim to follow Jesus as our Lord, how do our material possessions relate to spiritual matters?

Through the centuries, there's been a lot of confusion about this issue. But it's a very real and relevant issue that we'd do well to reflect on during this Lenten season.

In the Old Testament, many people came to believe that since God had said He would bless those who obeyed Him and curse those who disobeyed Him, then if somebody had a lot of material possessions, they *must* be pleasing to God. Otherwise, why would they have all those blessings? The flipside of that was that if someone was poor or in need, then obviously this person had somehow displeased God and was under His curse. This was a misunderstanding of great magnitude!

In the first and second centuries, some believed that spirit was good and matter was evil, and therefore the two could never have anything to do with each other. Their influence among some early Christians led to a heresy called *Docetism*. They taught that the Son of God obviously *had* to be spiritual; thus He could never mingle with the material. So in their view, in Jesus God the Son didn't *really* take on human flesh; He just *appeared* to be a man. That sort of does away with any significance of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, doesn't it?

There's a lot of confusion today among Christians about the relationship between material things and spiritual matters. You don't have to have the TV on a religious station very long before you'll hear someone preaching or teaching that if you're pleasing God, you'll be blessed with good health and prosperity in this life. It's called "the health and wealth gospel" or "prosperity gospel." And it's what many people want to hear.

But try telling this to the martyrs, both ancient and contemporary. Try telling it to those in other parts of the world who are suffering for their faith today. Try telling it to that faithful saint who has served the Lord all her life, and is now a widow on a fixed income and in declining health herself, or to the great majority of Christians in other lands who live in dire poverty.

We live in a world that has both a material dimension and a spiritual dimension. Sometimes the veil that separates the two gets pulled back a little and we see things that we can't see with our physical eyes. It's not that those things aren't real. On the contrary, the things of the eternal spiritual realm are more real than anything in this material physical realm! They're just different.

But is there ever a time when *material* things become a *spiritual* matter?

#### ***A rejected request and a pointed parable***

Look at what happened in our passage from Luke.

As Jesus was teaching the crowds, He had been warning them to be on guard against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He had also called them to absolute faithfulness, trusting God even when it threatened their very physical survival.

In the midst of that, some man in the crowd spoke up and said, **“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me”** (12:13).<sup>1</sup>

You’ve seen it before, haven’t you—a dispute in the family about the inheritance? According to custom in the ancient Jewish world, the oldest son was supposed to receive a double share of the inheritance. Apparently, there were two sons in this family, and the younger felt the older wasn’t giving him his rightful share.

Now it wasn’t unusual to appeal to a rabbi in cases like this. But Jesus refused to get involved, telling him, **“Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter over you?”** Then Jesus issued a warning against greed, with one of the most poignant statements ever made about material possessions: **“life does not consist in an abundance of possessions”** (12:15).

What did He mean by that? He told a parable to illustrate what He was saying.

A certain rich man’s crop was very abundant one year, to the point that he didn’t have enough room to store it. He decided he would tear down his old barns and build new, bigger barns to hold his crops. He decided that this gave him all the security he needed, that he would be able to sit back, relax, and eat, drink, and be merry.

But he made a very serious error in his calculations. *He never took God into account.* So in the parable God says to the man, **“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”** (12:20).

Then Jesus said, **“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God”** (12:21).

We Americans are a lot like that rich man. A 2009 article in the *New York Times Magazine* reported these statistics about the *self-storage* business in America:

- The United States had 2.3 billion square feet of self-storage space—more than seven square feet for every man, woman and child. The article went on to say that it was now “physically possible that every American could stand—all at the same time—under the total canopy of self-storage roofing.”
- The United States had upward of 51,000 storage facilities, more than seven times the number of Starbucks Coffee houses.
- By the early 1990s Americans had, on average, twice as many possessions as they did 25 years earlier.
- 50 percent of storage renters stored stuff that wouldn’t fit in their homes, even though the size of the average American home had doubled in the previous 50 years.
- 15 percent of customers told the Self-Storage Association that they were storing items they “no longer need or want.”<sup>2</sup>

Sort of makes you wonder, doesn’t it?

Now when Jesus told this story, was He telling us not to save and prepare for the future, not to be wise stewards? Of course not! What He meant is that we are not to *depend* on possessions, we’re not to store things up for ourselves *without* being rich toward God. Our material possessions are to pale in comparison to our relationship with, worship of, and dependence on Him.

The point is that accumulating possessions and wealth is *not* the most important thing in life!

*That makes material things a spiritual matter.* If we put them in the place of God, we're in deep spiritual trouble! It's fine to have material possessions, so long as we submit them to God and use them as He would have us use them. And most of all, we must trust in God, not our possessions!

### ***A call to simple trust and heavenly treasure***

Jesus then turned to His disciples, and told them not to worry about the daily necessities of life. He didn't dismiss their importance; He just emphasized that they're not what's *most* important! He told His disciples *not to worry* about these things. After all, life is more than food and the body more than clothes. He pointed to the ravens and how God cared for them, and told them that they were far more valuable to God than birds!

So if a person can't add even an hour to their life by worrying, why worry about even bigger things?

Then Jesus pointed to the wild flowers and how God clothes them. They're here today and used for kindling tomorrow! Won't God clothe His people much more?

Jesus said that worry is pagan, because our heavenly Father knows what we need! So we should seek God's kingdom, knowing He will give us these things as well.

Now the kingdom is God's reign and rule in our lives and over all His creation. Jesus says His disciples can seek it confidently, because the **"Father has been pleased"** to give it to His followers (12:32)! So believers, rather than hoarding earthly possessions, should use them to make heavenly investments; after all, one's heart will be where his or her treasure is!

Yet how many times do we worry about these things? Worry stems from lack of trust in God! He knows we need the basic necessities for survival, and He will provide them as we trust in Him and seek His kingdom!

So that's another way that material things become a spiritual matter—*when we confuse them with living under God's rule.*

The point of it all is that the kingdom of God—God's reign—is the most important thing in life. It must be our focus! We must never allow greed and worry to divert our attention from it. The kingdom is far more important than possessions or even survival!

You see, the problem is not material things or possessions. They're generally neither good nor bad. The problem is our dependence on them! We must seek God's kingdom with a single mind and a pure heart. When we lay up heavenly treasure that's not subject to theft and decay, our hearts will be in heaven, because God's will and reign will be what really matters to us!

### ***Putting things in the right place***

When we submit our material possessions and needs to God as we seek His kingdom and store up our treasure in heaven, then material things become a spiritual matter in the very best sense! In other words, *the way we relate to material things is ultimately a spiritual matter.*

So what will this look like for us as Christians living in 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture? How do we do what Jesus is talking about here?

Well, first and foremost, *we will trust God with ourselves, our possessions, and our needs.* Whatever we have ultimately comes from Him, because *it all belongs to Him.* We can be confident that if there's something we truly need but don't have, God will provide for it as we trust Him and live in obedience to His word and His ways. When we truly trust ourselves to God, we can trust Him with both our possessions and our needs.

Now that can be challenging, because if we're not seeking God's kingdom, our agenda for our material possessions and needs may be very different from God's. But we have to keep coming back to the fact that He is our loving heavenly Father who knows our needs and will provide us with everything we need to do His will.

Really trusting God leads to the second thing: *we will use our material possessions for spiritual purposes.*

Michael Riley has said it well: "Affluent believers are not free to do with their wealth as they please; they are free to do with their wealth as God pleases."<sup>3</sup>

You see, God entrusts us with whatever we have, however much or little, as stewards. Sometimes using material possessions for spiritual purposes will look very material. For instance, God expects us to provide for our families. Clothing our children and putting a roof over our family's head and food on the table all have a very material appearance to them. But these things really fulfill a spiritual purpose, because they demonstrate our love and care for our families and foster for them a sense of emotional as well as physical security.

Likewise, as followers of Jesus, *we will use our material goods to participate in God's work in the world.* There's little we do as a church in the way of mission and ministry that does not have a financial cost and require money. Whether we have much or little in the way of material things, one way that God has ordained that His people support and participate in His work in the world is through proportionate, systematic, sacrificial giving—not to a budget, but to the cause and mission of Christ! When we do that, we are in truth making *heavenly investments*, storing up our treasure in heaven. And that's critical.

Because the most important thing to remember about how we relate to material things is that *our hearts will ultimately be where our treasure—what really means most to us—is.*

So where is your treasure?

It really is a spiritual matter!

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

<sup>2</sup> Jon Mooallem, "The Self Storage Self," *The New York Times* (09/02/09); <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2009/november/3111609.html> (last accessed 03/14/19).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Riley, notes on Nehemiah in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 689.