

# Holiness: When Empty Means Full

by Henry W. Spaulding

Materialism is a spiritual disease. It brashly claims that only matter is real. It fawns over what can be held in the hand and pretends that significance depends on things. Its distortions of reality are manifest in our time through the demand for designer clothes, designer automobiles, and designer bodies. We accumulate prestige and price tags, feeding cravings we can never satisfy, and we soon hunger and thirst again. We lose sight of eternity in the frantic scramble to prove by what we own that we are valuable—even, perhaps, that we exist.

Attempting to define sin, Paul wrote, “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25\*). While this description encompasses far more than materialism, it certainly includes it. A sin-sick life pretends that things finally satisfy our deepest longing.

I first felt the lure of materialism in eighth grade. A friend informed me that unless I started wearing brand name shirts, we could not remain friends. A cloud formed in my self-image as a longing for brand name shirts controlled my life. I finally did get a brand name shirt. It was on sale, but nobody needed to know that little bit of information. The more brand name shirts I had, the more worth I was supposed to feel. This is the way materialism first stakes its claim in our lives. Perhaps it is in our early years when we want to belong that patterns are set for all of life. If we are not careful, it will matter more what we wear or where we live than the kind of person we are on the inside. This is the temptation that materialism places at every person’s doorstep.

## WHAT THE SCRIPTURE SAYS

The Bible addresses materialism head-on. The defining point of materialism is not being rich and prosperous; it is forgetting God. The Word promises that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled (Matthew 5:6). It warns the rich, “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry” (Luke 6:25). It urges us not to worry about what we will eat, drink, or wear (Matthew 6:31). We are instructed that “life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). Jesus put it this way: “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it” (Luke 17:33). The issue in the Scriptures is never money itself. The crucial question comes down to this: Who will be our master? Jesus said, “No one

can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24). Put this way, the issue is rather simple.

Preoccupation with money and possessions is dangerous. It is sinful. The Bible points out again and again that a person is governed by what controls the mind. Yet we need to be careful here. Too many hear the warning and conclude that possessions are evil in and of themselves. Such an understanding leads to an unhealthy dualism in the Christian life between the spiritual and the physical. It makes the poor holy for no reason other than poverty. It makes the rich wicked for no reason other than wealth. The Word will not allow this understanding. “The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all” (Proverbs 22:2). This does not condone a preoccupation with material things. According to Proverbs 15:16, “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it.” Proverbs 16:16 reads, “How much better to get wisdom than gold!”

Materialism is condemned in the Bible, but the material world is not. The Word connects the physical and the spiritual in such a way that we see matter as related to God. We see the spiritual in the material and the material in the spiritual. Christians know nothing of the dualism between the physical and the spiritual. The issue is not whether we have things; it is whether they have us.

## **HOW SHALL WE LIVE?**

The genius of heart holiness is wholeness. Holiness means learning how to live a healthy life in a culture of materialism. The theme of the holy life is the connection among our relationships to God, family, vocation, and personal choices. Holiness states that what we do with our bodies is important. It matters how we spend our time or what we do with our money. The things that capture our minds matter to God. The Bible suggests that holiness can be embodied in our earthen vessels. The temptation to reduce life to material things is ever present. Yet we are called to be holy in a materialistic culture.

Jesus embodies the hope of living a holy life in a culture of materialism. Paul wrote that Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:7). He also wrote that Jesus “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (Philippians 2:6). “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” Jesus said (Matthew 8:20). The key to living a holy life in a culture of materialism is to imitate the Christ we meet in the Scriptures.

Paul makes this clear in Philippians 2:1-5. First, we are to be of the same mind as Christ, allowing the love of God to flow through us to touch the hurts and needs of others. We are to be generous with those in need; God has blessed us in order to help others. We can distill the counsel of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, this way: Make all you can, save all you

can, and give all you can. God calls us to hold material things loosely. How can those who have been reconciled to God through the gift of God in Jesus be anything except gracious to others?

Second, we are to do nothing from self-ambition. It is not the sport utility vehicle that makes the person. Neither is it the house or neighborhood. The purpose of the Christian life is not to be successful but to be obedient. If God blesses us with money it should not be cause for conceit but for thanksgiving. A person who spends all of life trying to make money will inevitably miss the sweet blessings of God along the way. The God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills will not be impressed with our things but with our humble hearts.

Third, we must look to the interests of others. The malady of a materialistic culture is self-absorption. We can become so concerned with our needs that the life and death problems of others never reach our hearts. Paul shows us in Philippians 2 that compassion and sympathy derive from Jesus. The extent to which we have the mind of Christ will be defined by the degree to which the interests of others move us to action. God's people empathize with others.

Near the end of Philippians, Paul wrote, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6-7). A life so lived is generous, carefree, joyous, and Christlike. These are the virtues that guide us to holiness in a materialistic culture.

\*All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

**Henry W. Spaulding II** is dean of arts and sciences and professor of theology and philosophy at Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville, Tennessee.