

Sabbath School Lesson #1 – The Influence of Materialism – 30 Dec 2017 – 5 Jan 2018

Christ would have us live content beyond the reach of materialism. “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Romans 12:2). This is the first Lesson in 1st Quarter 2018 Stewardship: Motives of the Heart. Our study this week focus on 1 John 2:16-17; Luke 14:26-33; 12:15-21; Deuteronomy 8:10-14; 1 Timothy 6:10; John 15:5; Galatians 2:20.

Sunday: The god of This World – Who is the god of this world? Satan, “the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2), is “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4), the chief of “the rulers of the darkness of this world” (Ephesians 6:12). When the world was created, perfect and glorious, it was given to man. Man was made king – God’s viceroy on earth. But man proved recreant to his trust, and basely sold himself to Satan, who of course thereby gained possession of the dominion. Satan’s usurpation of the earth at once corrupted it; but God never acquiesced in the transaction. God, in giving the earth to man, did not give up His own right as Over-Lord, and therefore when Satan overthrew man, and seized his kingdom, he did not in the least degree diminish God’s right. Satan is indeed god of this world; but this present evil world is not the world that God designed for man’s dwelling-place, and it is not what Christ came to acquire for man. No one can ever get a better title than he himself possesses. God is the “possessor of heaven and earth” (Genesis 14:19); He alone can give a valid title. Satan is a thief, and whoever receives goods at his hands must know that they will sooner or later be confiscated. But this is just what the majority of men never think of. They grasp after the glittering prize that Satan holds out, not recognizing the difference between what only seems to be and what really is. It is only in Christ that we have a clear perception of things that differ, and in Christ we can resist Satan’s allurements.

Christ conquered, in order that we might conquer. His victory is ours, if we fully accept Him. “This is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4). “Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Ephesians 4:7); therefore to meet the temptation of the small portion of “this present evil world” (Galatians 1:4) that is offered to us we have the strength that met and conquered the whole of it. Thus we are “more than conquerors through Him that loved us” (Romans 8:37). Here is a bit of practical help in resisting “fleshly lusts that war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11): let us say, for example, that you are very hungry, and that along with the plant-based whole food that your system really requires, there is set before you animal-based junk food, pleasing to the palate, but not helpful to one who strives for the mastery. Now stop a moment and consider the end. It seems at this moment as if you want junk food more than anything else in the world; but if you listen to wisdom you will know that if you will but wait a little while, until you have satisfied your legitimate wants with good food, you will not care for this tempting morsel. In short, put yourself at once on the further side of the temptation, and you have won. You put it behind your back. We escape the sinful attractions of this world, by transporting ourselves by faith in the future, eternal world, laying hold of the power of the world to come. Let us pray that the god of this world does not blind our eyes by the glitter of this present evil world.

Monday: Filling the Barns – According to Oxfam, in 2017 the world’s eight richest billionaires controlled the same wealth between them as the poorest 50% of the globe’s population (*The Guardian*, 16 Jan 2017). Such wealth is not used, but simply hoarded, rusting and useless. The word of the Lord said that such things would come to pass. James says to these rich, “Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you ... Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days” (James 5:3). But it is for the poor as well as the rich to beware of covetousness; for it is one of the sins which the Apostle said would make the last days perilous. A man’s life does not consist of the abundance of the things which he possesseth (Luke 12:15).

Hoarding wealth means poverty. “There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty” (Proverbs 11:24). A law of God’s universe is whatever is hoarded withers away, and that which is scattered abroad increases. It is not money, that is the evil, but the love of it which leads one to hoard it up merely to look at, or as a fancied security against future need. Hoarding up wealth not only tends to poverty, but it is a sign of it. The miser has a constant sense of lack. The old epitaph on a miser who had heaped up thousands, ended thus: ‘Yet this poor man, with all his store, died in great want, – the want of more.’ The man of small means, who freely divide what he has with others, is the real rich man. His action shows his recognition of the fact that he is in connection with a boundless store of wealth. A small stream of water constantly flowing is far better than thousands of barrels of water stored up in a cistern.

Tuesday: The Allure of Materialism – “No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God

and mammon. Therefore I say unto you, Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor for your body, what ye shall put on” (Matthew 6:24-25). The first part of this passage, concerning the two masters, is self-evident. No man can serve two masters, especially when they are directly opposed to each other, as God and mammon. Mammon was the Chaldean god supposed to preside over wealth and the acquisition of property. So here it stands for property of any kind, not necessarily great riches, but whatever one acquires of this world’s goods. But what is the force of the “therefore”? Why “therefore ... be not anxious”? – because such anxiety would show us to be servants of mammon, and not servants of God. We serve that for which we live. If our whole anxiety is for food, drink, and clothing, this is an indication that we live for those things, that we serve them, instead of making those things our servants. But if there were nothing more to life than merely a struggle to get that with which to keep life going, life would not be worth living. Yet, many live to keep life going. Life is more than meat, and the body more than raiment.

Wednesday: Love of Self – There is no more natural tendency of the human heart than to think highly of self. Yet this, like all other tendencies of the natural heart, stands in the way of all efforts to live the Christian life. The Apostle Paul wrote, “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). How highly, then, ought a man to think of himself? The same apostle has answered this question in his epistle to the Galatians: “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself” (Galatians 6:2-3). A man who thinks truthfully of himself will know that he is nothing. And this places him upon a level with all his fellow-men, so that he may not disdain to bear their burdens, and to esteem others better than himself (Philippians 2:3). The way of the world is to seek to exalt self. The way of God is to abase self, and become the servant of others. But exaltation is attained by the latter way, and not by the way of the world. The wisdom of God is foolishness with men; but “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1 Corinthians 1:25). There is no real wisdom in seeking exaltation by one’s own efforts. It is far better to let others lift you up who have more power than you have yourself. The principle of service to others is the true principle of exaltation, for it is service to others that secures their esteem and wins their efforts, and clears the pathway of the opposition and ill-will which pursues and drags down the individual who seeks his own aggrandizement at the expense of others.

Thursday: The Ultimate Futility of Materialism – The vast increase of labour strikes and disputes in all countries shows that wage earners of the world are resenting the control of the wealth of the world by the few. From what we already see, and from the testimony of history, and by the word of God, we know that the fear of the Lord will not keep the selfish rich from covetousness nor the selfish poor from methods of violence. Now is the time, as never before, for those who do fear the Lord to keep clear from the prevailing evil; for in these days we are told that times are especially perilous, because men are “lovers of their own selves, covetous,” and the warning is given to Christians in order that they may not partake of the spirit of the times. The coming of the Lord is surely drawing near. The ultimate futility of materialism and the woe that will come upon those who have spent their God-given powers to amass wealth is thus spoken by the prophet James: “Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days” (James 5:1-3). The word goes on to state that the rightful hire of the labourers has been kept back by fraud. Not unnaturally, such a course as this leads to dissatisfaction and strife, and the conflict is already begun. The passions of the natural heart lead on both sides of the strife, and the natural heart never works according to the Golden Rule. The attitude of the really Christian man who suffers under the oppression of the mighty and powerful is shown by the apostle when he says to the oppressors, “Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you” (verse 6). The non-resistance principle, which Christ taught by precept and example is popularly supposed to be obsolete; but in the text just quoted the Lord lays it down as the rule for us in these last days. At the time when men are banding together to strike to fight for their rights after the manner and methods of the world, His counsel to us is: “Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts; for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh. Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door” (James 5:7-9). A true Christian is not to be found fighting with the worldly for this world’s possessions when the Judge of all is even at the door. There is wisdom in James chapter five for all of us in these unsettled times.