

“The Pursuit of Happiness: Beyond Materialism”

Ecclesiastes 5:10-20; Matthew 6:19-24

November 5, 2023

When I was a kid, I got a lot of things wrong, I readily admit it. And, as I was thinking back humorously on my past mistakes, I couldn't help but remember one of them in particular as it relates to this morning's sermon. You see, back when I was younger, my parents were fortunate enough to give me a car for my 16th birthday. It was a hand-me-down, Dad's old car, but I was grateful for it, nevertheless. It was a 1976 Plymouth Volare with about 175k miles on it, a little run-down from the wear and tear but, overall, a really serviceable car. And I liked it...for the most part. I mean it had power steering, power breaks, power windows, a V-6. But it had one glaring problem, according to my teenaged accounting – the stereo in the car stunk, strangely, it didn't even have a tape player, something that was fairly standard for the era, believe it or not. Well, one of the first things I did was sink an inordinate amount of money on upgrading the car's stereo system. And when I say, upgrade, boy did I. You see, I knew a guy at Audio Express, a local car audio shop. He got me hooked up with a sweet system, with bass cannons in the back and, get this, a removeable face car stereo. Do you remember those? They were the height of cool, back in the day, weren't they? So, basically, it was an anti-theft design. You removed the face of the stereo, thereby rendering it inoperable to any wanna be car thieves. It was pretty slick. So, anyway, fast forward about a year from me dropping this obscene amount of money on the car stereo. In fact, I remember as I told my parents what I'd spent, my dad observed that it was likely that I'd spent more money on the car stereo than the car itself was worth. But, long story short, I was in a wreck on Park Road. That 1978 Fire Engine Red Plymouth Volare with the obnoxiously loud car stereo was totaled in the process. Y'all, I'll never forget the insurance company telling me just how much I was going to receive for the car. Y'all, it was less than I'd paid for the car stereo. You know, I mentioned that to the insurance person...they didn't seem too terribly impressed and they certainly didn't up the number. In fact, the person nicely suggested I could retrieve the stereo parts from the car before it was salvaged. It all went up in smoke, in a manner of speaking. All that time, effort and money evaporated like so much mist on a summer's day. If only I'd learned my lesson way back there in 1993, I think I'd have lived a much more contented life. Ah, but I didn't. I, just along with everyone else under the sun, have made the mistake at times of investing far more of my life's energy and resources to chasing and attaining things that the Bible assures me will not last. In the case of that obscenely priced stereo system, it lasted about a year, right?

Jesus tells us as much in our reading this morning from the New Testament. **Matthew 6:19** – “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal...*” Contrast this with something that the Apostle Peter writes in his First Epistle. There, in **1 Peter 1:4** we read this contrasting statement – “*and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.*”

What the Scriptures teach us is that our romance with materialism is bound to bring negative consequences. You know, we're doing a lot of talk about negative consequences because I think it's necessary for us to see that much of our present malaise can be traced back to ways in which we're wandering apart from God's ways. Sometimes these departures are fairly obvious. On other occasions, we have to take a step back and try to assess our present circumstances from the balcony, so to speak. When we die, we're bound to see greater and greater disunity with God bubbling up within our society.

Materialism, to be sure, is on the rise in this country and has been for so long that some of us might not recognize much of a change. Ah, but the numbers don't lie. We are becoming more and more materialistic in our culture. This can be seen in a number of ways. In the heart of our cities, amidst the ever-climbing skyscrapers and neon billboards, there lies a pulsing rhythm of change that echoes the surge of materialism in America. It's a narrative woven into the very fabric of our daily lives, seen in the bustling streets and the digital screens that light up our homes and palms. Let us explore this tapestry, thread by thread, to understand the ways materialism has painted its hues on the canvas of our society.

At the forefront of this narrative is *consumer spending*, a relentless tide that has swelled over the

last quarter-century. Americans, once the archetypal savers, have shifted their gaze from the modesty of yesteryear to the opulence of today. The allure of luxury has never been more persuasive, with spending on high-end goods not just rising but accelerating, as if racing against the very limits of desire. The temples of this new devotion are as close as the nearest shopping mall or as distant as the online marketplace, open 24/7, always ready to satisfy the next craving. Here, purchases are not just transactions; they are a rite of passage, a way to announce one's status, an attempt to buy into a dream that is always just one more purchase away.

I mean, I remember a day in which our neighborhoods weren't perpetually flooded with those ubiquitous Amazon vans. They announce to our neighbors our status as people who've purchased something important. But this dream is financed, increasingly, on borrowed time and borrowed dimes. The specter of debt looms large over the American household, with credit card balances and loans casting long shadows over future financial stability. This is a precarious dance on a floor of shifting sands, where the music of economic growth is often accompanied by the discordant tones of personal financial jeopardy.

The narrative of rising materialism is also told through our collective gaze, directed incessantly at screens of all sizes. Advertisements, a reflection of our desires, have morphed into high-resolution paeans to luxury, beamed into homes and hands with a frequency and intensity unknown to previous generations. They do not just sell products; they sell a lifestyle, an aspiration, a vision of life where material wealth is the protagonist, and all other values are part of the supporting cast. And in the quiet corners of our existence, the impact of this materialistic surge is felt in the erosion of savings rates. The American dream, once built on the foundation of frugality and saving for the rainy day, now finds itself on a floodplain, with the waters of immediate gratification rising steadily.

The widening chasm of income inequality further complicates the plot. As the rich get richer, their opulent lifestyles set a benchmark that others strive to emulate. The result is an arms race of consumption, where the weapons are designer labels and the latest technology, and the casualties are often the financial and emotional well-being of those caught in the crossfire.

Even our self-conception is not immune to the shifting tides. Psychological research whispers a warning of the subtle changes in our collective psyche, where traits like narcissism and a sense of entitlement grow in the fertile soil of materialism. In the midst of this, social media platforms stand as both chroniclers and catalysts of the materialistic ethos. The influencer culture they spawn is a vivid illustration of the phenomenon, where life is curated, filtered, and broadcast as a series of possessions and experiences, each designed to outshine the last. And the thing is, this has an effect on us. In the quiet sanctuaries of our hearts, where whispers of truth and echoes of eternity reside, we find ourselves at a crossroads. The path of materialism, wide and well-traveled, stretches before us, its horizon brimming with the glint of gold and the sheen of desire. Yet, as we tread this path, our footsteps become heavier, not with riches, but with the burden of longing – a longing that is never truly satisfied.

Let us contemplate the solitary figure of the materialist, one who has amassed wealth and possessions beyond measure. In his home, the shelves groan under the weight of unopened gadgets, and the closets are a mosaic of designer labels. Yet, there is a hollowness in his laughter, a shadow in his pleasure. His possessions, once the symbols of success, have become the chains of an insatiable hunger. The more he acquires, the more he desires; the more he has, the less he feels he possesses. In his ceaseless accumulation, he has lost the very essence of joy, the joy that springs from simplicity, from contentment, from the peace of a grateful heart.

There is a thing in psychology known as the "hedonic treadmill." The hedonic treadmill, also known as hedonic adaptation, is a concept that suggests our levels of happiness tend to return to a baseline level, despite major positive or negative events or life changes. At its core, it is the psychological phenomenon that underpins human resilience and adaptability, but it also underscores the futility of pursuing happiness through material gains alone. Imagine running on a treadmill, where no matter how fast you go, you remain in the same spot. Similarly, as we experience increases in wealth or improvements in our standard of living, our expectations and desires rise at a commensurate rate. The initial joy and excitement we feel when we acquire a new object or achieve a new status often

fade over time, leading us right back to where we started in terms of satisfaction. The hedonic treadmill operates on the principle that while humans are remarkably good at acclimating to new situations, this adaptability comes with a cost. When it comes to material possessions or wealth, we quickly become accustomed to our new "normal." The luxurious car that once thrilled us soon becomes just another mode of transportation. The dream job that we believed would bring us ultimate satisfaction becomes just another routine.

This concept is not only restricted to positive experiences. People often demonstrate a remarkable ability to return to their baseline level of happiness even after experiencing significant adversities. It's a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and our capacity to heal and find equilibrium. However, the hedonic treadmill offers a cautionary tale about where we seek fulfillment. If material gains only offer a temporary boost in happiness, then perhaps lasting contentment is found elsewhere. Research points toward the pursuit of intrinsic goals—those that are inherently rewarding and not dependent on external validation—as a more reliable source of happiness. Activities that foster connections with others, contribute to the community, and allow for personal growth and self-acceptance tend to provide a more enduring sense of well-being.

In understanding the hedonic treadmill, we gain insight into the paradox of prosperity: as societies grow wealthier, their citizens do not necessarily become happier. It prompts a reevaluation of what we chase after and why, steering us toward the intangible yet profound joys that can be found in the simple, the everyday, and the real connections we forge with the world around us. This narrative of acquisition and emptiness is not confined to the individual; it seeps into the very fabric of society. A society steeped in materialism is like a tree that has grown too quickly, its wood weak, its roots shallow. On the outside, it is impressive in stature, but inside, it is vulnerable to the storms of change. In such a society, relationships become transactions, and values are measured in currency. Trust erodes, as suspicion takes root in the fear of losing wealth. Communities fragment, as competition replaces cooperation, and the common good is sacrificed on the altar of personal gain.

The symptoms of this malaise are evident in the strained eyes of our children, who learn to equate worth with wealth and success with excess. They are bombarded with images of what they must have to be happy, yet happiness eludes them, for it cannot be bought, cannot be worn, cannot be driven, nor contained within the walls of an opulent mansion. In the relentless pursuit of more, society stumbles, blinded by the glare of consumption. Nature suffers under the demands of our greed, as forests fall silent and rivers run dry. The earth, entrusted to our care, groans under the weight of waste and the scars of exploitation.

But there is hope, dear friends, for the cure lies within each of us. It lies in our ability to say 'enough,' to find richness in the intangible, to forge connections that are not predicated on wealth but on shared humanity. It lies in our capacity to appreciate the beauty of simplicity, to teach our children the worth of virtue, the value of service, and the importance of character. What Jesus tells us here is consequential to our health and to our happiness. For we can reject the principles of the present society that more is better and that greed is good and listen to what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has to say about matters.

Here, in the 6th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is in the midst of His most significant ethical teaching. Called "The Sermon on the Mount," Jesus takes time to explain many things which show us how to live our lives in a Christian manner. And one of the ways that we live our lives in such a Christian manner is through the rejection of materialism as a benevolent ideology. While we are not opposed in principle to possessions, we are cautious about how they are seen and valued. You see, the most important part of any Christian walk is placing our relationship with Jesus Christ in proper order in our lives. Make no mistake about it, our walk with Jesus IS, without peer, the most important element in our lives. And when we put other things in the top spot, even if they are good or neutral things, they become weights to our souls and bad for us entirely. You see, it's about proper valuing. That is to say that our relationship with Jesus Christ is the most valuable thing in our lives and when we allow other things to supplant that primary goal, then things are bound to get wonky.

One of the most notable stories is that of John Newton, an 18th-century Englishman. His life embodies a dramatic turn from the depths of materialism and moral bankruptcy to a profound spiritual

awakening. Born in 1735, Newton lived a tumultuous early life. His mother passed away when he was just six years old, and he was sent to sea with his father at the age of eleven. The young Newton eventually became involved in the transatlantic slave trade, a lucrative enterprise that epitomized the era's materialistic and inhumane pursuits. However, it was during a perilous voyage back from Africa, when his ship was caught in a severe storm and nearly wrecked, that Newton experienced his "great deliverance." Believing that they were on the cusp of disaster, he pleaded for God's mercy, a moment that marked the beginning of his spiritual conversion. In the years that followed, Newton's transformation became more profound. He abandoned his former life, including his role in the slave trade, and turned to theology and pastoral work. The wealth he once sought no longer held sway over his heart. He studied Christian texts and was eventually ordained in the Church of England. Newton's rejection of materialism wasn't just a personal victory; it had societal implications as well. His deep regret and condemnation of his past involvement in slavery fueled his passion for abolition. He joined forces with William Wilberforce and others, providing a searing testimony about the slave trade's brutal realities, which played a critical role in the eventual abolition of slavery in Britain.

His legacy is also immortalized in the hymn "Amazing Grace," which he penned, reflecting his journey from "a wretch" lost in worldly greed to a man saved by faith, who was "blind" but then "saw" the light of spiritual truth. Newton's story is a poignant example of a life radically transformed by faith and a testament to the profound changes that can occur when one relinquishes materialism for a deeper relationship with the divine. His life encourages believers that no one is beyond redemption and that true fulfillment comes not from material wealth but from a life lived in service to God and humanity.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.