

6

WHEN MATERIALISM CONSUMES



What's your favorite thing to spend money on?

QUESTION #1

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **109**

THE POINT

*Possessions never satisfy nor last,
but the love of God does.*



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Let's admit it, we enjoy the American lifestyle. We live well, relatively speaking. Even the bottom ten percent of Americans fare far better than they would in other countries—even better than the top ten percent in some nations!¹

When the economy is good and we've got money, it feels only natural to spend it. Just when we want to cut back or save, the advertisers seem to clobber us with extra hype to convince us we need whatever they're selling. And when "everybody else has it," it becomes even easier to make that next purchase. Consider ... We buy food—certainly a necessity—then let nearly forty percent of it go to waste; Americans spend more on fashion accessories than college tuition; Our children own nearly half the world's toys; Homes in the United States have more TVs than people; The average American household has \$7,500 in consumer debt.²

The things we consume appear to be consuming us! God certainly wants us to enjoy life, but He has a far better and more satisfying way. God's approach has nothing to do with possessions, but it has everything to do with our love for Him.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

1 John 2:12-14

¹² I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. ¹³ I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. ¹⁴ I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

John wrote to three groups of people: little children, fathers, and young men. Some people take this at face value related to physical age. Others believe this referred to younger Christians and more mature Christians. And still others think John was addressing the church as a whole, since the statements he makes could be applied to any believer. However you choose to group these, John clearly had something to say for all those who follow Christ.

- ▶ **Children.** "Your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. . . . you know the Father." That is the starting place, the beginning of salvation. Salvation begins when we turn from our sin and self and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. As a result, we know God. Throughout this short letter, John wanted his readers to realize that they could know with assurance they belong to God. This assurance is the theme of 1 John.
- ▶ **Young Men.** "You are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one." Because Jesus has won the victory, they could live daily, knowing they too had victory. They could stand against the evil one in spiritual battle because they were strong through God's Word.

What are some ways you know God better now than when you first came to Christ?

QUESTION #2

- ▶ **Fathers.** “You know him who is from the beginning.” It is the same for the spiritually mature as it is for the young believer: faith begins and ends with knowledge of Jesus Christ.

We might feel we are children in the faith. Or we may be spiritually mature, helping to nurture others in their faith. Regardless of where you are in your walk with God, you still have more progress to make.

What does this have to do with the problem of consumerism? In the next verses, John addressed the problem of loving things. In fact, we’ll see that loving the things the world chases is incompatible with loving God. So, in verses 12-14, John set the stage by reminding the believers—both young and old—who they were in Christ. Christ-followers are those who, first and foremost, know God and love Him.

1 John 2:15-17

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

One of the most well known verses in the Bible is John 3:16: “For God so loved the world . . .” (KJV). Yet, here John told us “do *not* love the world” (emphasis added). The difference is in how John used the word *world*. Context clarifies whether he was referring to humanity, the physical earth, or an evil system under the control of Satan. So, while we are to love the people of this world even as Jesus does (see 13:34), we are not to love the evil and sinful things that surround us. In fact, John made a strikingly strong statement: we can’t love the world and God at the same time.

How do we navigate the tension between enjoying our possessions and being consumed by them?

QUESTION #3

John identified three ways the world entices us to seek contentment and fulfillment apart from the Father.

- 1. The desires of the flesh.** This phrase may cause us to think first of misusing sex, but this desire is much broader than just sexual sin. It captures the idea of fulfilling any of our natural desires in the wrong way.
- 2. The desires of the eyes.** The desires of the flesh has to do with our physical appetites, but the desires of the eyes is about our mental appetites. We might think of books, movies, or any form of amusement that excites our eyes or minds.
- 3. The pride of life.** We can lump anything that causes us to focus attention on ourselves rather than Christ into this category. It's about making ourselves number one with our things instead of God.

This is nothing new! Even the first sin committed included these worldly attitudes. “The woman saw that the tree was good for food [desire of the flesh], and that it was a delight to the eyes [desire of the eyes], and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise [pride of one’s possession], she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6, emphasis added).

These attitudes are all prevalent today. Our craving for stuff reflects the eagerness to gratify our desires. This is futile because these things that consume us will ultimately disappear—“the world is passing away along with its desires.” Then what are we left with?

How does a focus on the gospel change our perspective toward our possessions?

QUESTION #4



1 John 3:16-18

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

What does love look like? We have no greater example than Jesus Christ. He gave up the glories of His throne in heaven to live among us. And He "laid down his life for us." We are also called to "lay down our lives for the brothers." We do not give up our lives for the same reason Jesus did; we cannot step in and take the sins of others as a sacrifice of atonement. We have other ways, though, we can sacrifice for others.

Instead of being consumed with materialism, we could sacrifice our possessions for the sake of others. We may not have to sacrifice our physical lives, but we can certainly give up material possessions. We need to consider how much we spend on ourselves compared with how much we give toward the needs of others and to the cause of Christ. We need to limit our consumption and increase our compassion.

Love is not a matter of words. "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." It's easy to talk about our commitment to Christ and our willingness to sacrifice for Him, but John stressed that it is our actions that truly communicate love.

We don't know much more than his name, but Paul made one revealing comment about a man named Demas: "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me" (2 Tim. 4:10). If we let materialism and our possessions take over, we fall into the same danger Demas did. We can forsake our jobs, families, church, and even God if we don't guard against a love of the world.

We experience greater joy when we love God completely. When His love consumes us, we become a conduit to pass on His love. Then our possessions become another way for us to show Christ's love.

What are some practical ways our group can demonstrate love in truth and action?

QUESTION #5

EVALUATING MY HEART⁴

*Look at the list below and evaluate your own heart.
Where do you think you stand in each of these areas?*

Things of This World

Focus on me

1 2 3 4

Greedy

1 2 3 4

Make a name for self

1 2 3 4

Do what makes me happy

1 2 3 4

Serve me

1 2 3 4

Demand your rights

1 2 3 4

Doing my will

1 2 3 4

Things of God

Focus on God

5

Generous

5

Make His name great

5

Do what makes God happy

5

Serve others

5

Prefer the other person

5

Doing the will of God

5

LIVE IT OUT

Materialism is all around us. Consider where your heart is focused and choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Pray.** Ask the Lord to help you love Him more than anything. Pray that others would see your love and heart for Christ through your actions.
- ▶ **Evaluate.** Chart the many ways you use your money. List the possessions you own and their relative value. Consider what your possessions and finances reveal about your priorities and goals in life. Is it evident that you love the Lord by what you do with what you have?
- ▶ **Give.** Think about tangible ways you can help someone in need. Find ways to use your possessions for the benefit of others. Give things away as you seek to express the love of Christ to others.



Our society thrives on the latest and greatest. Nothing is inherently wrong with having things, but they can hold us back from loving the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength if we're not careful.

My thoughts

1. Tim Worstall, "Astonishing Numbers: America's Poor Still Live Better Than Most of the Rest of Humanity," *Forbes*, June 1, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2013/06/01/astonishing-numbers-americas-poor-still-live-better-than-most-of-the-rest-of-humanity/#70a6641f54ef>.
2. Jesse Carey, "Stats that Will Change the Way You Think About Consumerism," *Relevant*, November 23, 2017, <https://relevantmagazine.com/current/11-stats-will-change-way-you-think-about-consumerism>.
3. Wax, Trevin, *This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths in Light of the Gospel*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).
4. List adapted from: Akin, Danny. "The Love God Hates—1 John 2:12-17." DanielAkin.com, 16-17; <http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/1-John-2.12-17The-Love-God-Hates-manuscript-mjh.pdf>.