

I See, I Want, I Take



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Cor. 8:1–7; Matt. 13:3–7, 22; Gen. 3:1–6; Isa. 56:11; Matt. 26:14–16; 2 Pet. 1:5–9.

Memory Text: “ ‘Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful’ ” (Matthew 13:22, NKJV).

The love of money and material possessions can come at us from many different angles. Ellen G. White describes the devil's ploy to lure us through the wiles of materialism. “ ‘Go, make the possessors of lands and money drunk with the cares of this life. Present the world before them in its most attractive light, that they may lay up their treasure here, and fix their affections upon earthly things. We must do our utmost to prevent those who labor in God's cause from obtaining means to use against us. Keep the money in our own ranks. The more means they obtain, the more they will injure our kingdom by taking from us our subjects. Make them care more for money than the upbuilding of Christ's kingdom and the spread of the truths we hate, and we need not fear their influence; for we know that every selfish, covetous person will fall under our power, and will finally be separated from God's people.’ ”—*Counsels on Stewardship*, pp. 154, 155.

Unfortunately, this ploy seems to be working well. Let us look then at these dangers and what the Word of God says to us so that we can avoid this spiritual trap.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 13.

The Prosperity Gospel

A popular television preacher has a simple message: God wants to bless you, and the proof of His blessing is the abundance of material possessions that you own. In other words, if you are faithful, God will make you wealthy.

This idea, or variants of it, has been called the prosperity gospel: *follow God, and He will make you wealthy in worldly goods*. This idea is nothing but a false theological justification for materialism, because what it's really saying is, *Do you want to be materialistic and to feel good about it? Well, we have got the "gospel" for you*.

Yet, connecting the gospel with guaranteed wealth is a misdirected sideshow. This belief creates dissonance with Scripture and reflects a self-centered theology that is nothing more than half-truth clothed in biblical language. At the core of this lie is the issue at the core of all sin, and that is self and the desire to please self above everything else.

The theology of the prosperity gospel teaches that, in giving to God, we gain in return a guarantee of material wealth. But this makes God a vending machine and turns our relationship with Him into nothing but a deal: *I do this and You promise to do that in return*. We give, not because it is the right thing to do but because of what we get in return.

That's the prosperity gospel.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–7. What is happening here? What principles do we see in these verses that go against this idea of the prosperity gospel? What does Paul mean when he talks about the “grace of giving” 2 Cor. 8:7, NIV?

These people, although in “extreme poverty” (2 Cor. 8:2, NIV), were nevertheless very generous, giving even more than they could afford. Verses such as these, and many others, help refute the false theology of the prosperity gospel, which teaches that if you are living right with God you will have many material possessions to show for it.

What examples can you find of those who are faithful to God but are not rich in worldly possessions, and those who are not faithful to God but who are rich in worldly possessions? What should this tell us about using wealth as an indicator of God’s blessings?

Blurred Spiritual Eyesight

We don't need the Bible to teach us one obvious truth: the cares of this life and its riches are temporary. Nothing here lasts, and certainly not long either. As Paul said: "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). Christians have myopic vision when they are fixated on the cares of this world rather than on the path to heaven. And few things can blind their eyes to that path more than the deceitfulness of riches. Helen Keller, who was blind, said: "The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight, but has no vision." The Bible is filled with examples of those who could see but were, indeed, spiritually blind.

"Some love this world so much that it swallows up their love for the truth. As their treasures here increase, their interest in the heavenly treasure decreases. The more they possess of this world, the more closely do they hug it to them, as if fearful their coveted treasure would be taken from them. The more they possess, the less do they have to bestow upon others, for the more they have, the poorer they feel. O, the deceitfulness of riches! They will not see and feel the wants of the cause of God."—Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, p. 267.

Blurred spiritual eyesight puts eternal salvation in jeopardy. It is not enough to keep Jesus in view; we must keep Him in focus.

Read Matthew 13:3–7 and 22. What danger is Jesus warning us about here? Why is this an easy trap for anyone, rich or poor, to fall into?

First, Jesus warns us regarding "the cares of this world" (*Matt. 13:22, NKJV*). Jesus knows that we all have cares, including financial ones. The poor worry that they don't have enough; the rich worry about what else they might want. We just need to be certain that we don't let such cares "choke the word" (*Matt. 13:22, NKJV*) in our lives.

Second, Jesus warns us of "the deceitfulness of riches" (*Matt. 13:22, NKJV*). Although riches themselves are not evil, they still possess the power to deceive us in ways that can lead to our ultimate destruction.

What are ways that you can see the "deceitfulness of riches" in your own life? What practical choices can you make to protect yourself from this deception?

The Steps of Covetousness

Like all sins, covetousness begins in the heart. It starts inside us and then works outward. This is what happened in Eden.

Read Genesis 3:1–6. What did Satan do to lure Eve into sin? How has he used the same principles through the ages to deceive us, as well?

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate” (*Gen. 3:6, NKJV*).

If one didn’t know better, one could think that the advertising industry got its paradigmatic example of how to sell its products from the Eden story. The devil presented the fruit of the forbidden tree in a way to create in Eve a desire to want more than she already had and to make her think that she needed something that she really didn’t. How brilliant! Her fall is a demonstration of the three steps each of us takes when we fall to covetousness: *I see, I want, I take*.

Covetousness, of course, can be a quiet sin. Like lust, it’s hidden behind the veil of our flesh. But when it finally brings forth fruit, it can be devastating. It can damage relationships, leave scars on loved ones, and pummel us with guilt afterward.

Let covetousness surface, and it will override any principle. King Ahab saw Naboth’s vineyard, wanted it, and pouted until his queen had Naboth murdered for it (*1 Kings 21*). Achan could not resist when he saw a garment and money, so he coveted and took them (*Josh. 7:20–22*). Covetousness is, ultimately, just another form of selfishness.

“If selfishness be the prevailing form of sin, covetousness may be regarded as the prevailing form of selfishness. This is strikingly intimated by the Apostle Paul, when describing the ‘perilous times’ [*2 Tim. 3:1*] of the final apostasy, he represents selfishness as the prolific root of all the evils which will then prevail, and covetousness as its first fruit. ‘For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous’ [*2 Tim. 3:2*].”—John Harris, *Mammon* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1849), p. 52.

Why is it important to recognize in ourselves any and all tendencies toward covetousness?

Greed—Having Things Your Way

Read Isaiah 56:11. What sin is this text warning us about?

For us as fallen beings, greed can be as easy as breathing. And just as natural, too. However, it's hard to imagine anything in the human character that is less reflective of the character of Christ than greed. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9, NKJV).

Only the Lord knows the damage that greed has wrought throughout history. Greed has led to wars. Greed has caused people to commit crimes that brought ruin upon themselves and their families. Greed can be like a virus that will latch onto its host and consume every virtue until all that remains is more and more greed. Greed is a malady that wants everything: passion, power, and possessions. Again, *I see, I want, I take*.

Read Matthew 26:14–16. What can we learn about the power of greed from this sad story?

Notice Judas' words: " 'What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?' " (Matt. 26:15, NKJV). Talk about letting greed override everything else! Judas had been privileged as very few people had been in all history: he lived with the incarnate Jesus, witnessed His miracles, and heard Him preach the words of life. And yet—*look at what greed and covetousness led him to do*.

"How tenderly the Saviour dealt with him who was to be His betrayer! In His teaching, Jesus dwelt upon principles of benevolence that struck at the very root of covetousness. He presented before Judas the heinous character of greed, and many a time the disciple realized that his character had been portrayed, and his sin pointed out; but he would not confess and forsake his unrighteousness."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 295.

Who, if not careful, doesn't manifest some greed in his or her own character? How can we, through God's grace, keep this natural tendency under control?

Self-Control

Read the following texts. What are they saying that can and should help us understand how people, rich or poor, can protect themselves from the dangers that greed, covetousness, and the love of money and material things can present to the Christian?

Acts 24:24–26 _____

Gal. 5:22–25 _____

2 Pet. 1:5–9 _____

These texts are so rich and filled with a lot of divine injunction regarding how we should live. But notice one common thread: self-control. This trait can be particularly difficult when it comes to greed, covetousness, and the desire to own things. Only through self-control, first of our thoughts and then our actions, can we be protected from the dangers of the things we have been talking about.

We can exercise that control only to the degree with which we give ourselves over to the power of the Lord. None of us, on our own, can defeat these sinful traits, especially if they long have been cultivated and cherished. We truly need the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit in our lives if we are to gain victory over these powerful deceptions. “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (*1 Cor. 10:13, NKJV*).

Read again 2 Peter 1:5–9. To what path does Peter point? What are its steps, and how can we learn to follow them, especially in our struggle against greed and covetousness?

Further Thought: The ultimate human goal is to be happy and satisfied. But being self-fulfilled through materialism will not achieve this goal. Deep down people know this is true, and yet they continue in their obsession with possessions: *I see, I want, I take*. What could be simpler than that? Seventh-day Adventists, just like everyone else, are faced with the temptation to subscribe to the values of materialism. Yet, the continual acquisition of goods does not produce happiness, satisfaction, or contentment. Instead, it produces problems, as seen when the rich, young ruler turned away from Jesus unhappy, despondent, and downhearted because he did not hear or get what he wanted. “Materialistic values are associated with a pervasive undermining of people’s well-being, from low life satisfaction and happiness, to depression and anxiety, to physical problems such as headaches, and to personality disorders, narcissism, and antisocial behavior.”—Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 22.

Materialistic Christians, in other words, proudly drink from the well of wealth yet are spiritually dehydrated. But we will never thirst from drinking the water Christ gives (*John 4:14*).

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the idea of the prosperity gospel. What texts might those who believe in this idea use to try to promote it? At the same time, what examples can you find from the Bible of faithful people whose lives are living refutations of this false teaching?
- 2 After his first child was a few years old, a man said: “I have learned two important biblical truths from this child. First, that we are born sinners. Second, that we are born greedy.” Who can relate stories about how even children reveal just how naturally greedy we human beings are? What does this tell us about the need of divine grace?
- 3 “If we’re looking for the source of our troubles,” someone wrote, “we shouldn’t test people for drugs—we should test them for stupidity, ignorance, greed, and love of power.” What is it about greed that is so damaging, not just to the greedy person himself or herself but to those around him or her? What examples do you know of in which greed has caused terrible damage to all involved?

Praying for a Hindu Family

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Arpita Bhosale, a 14-year-old student at a Seventh-day Adventist school in western India, lost her Hindu father when a truck rear-ended his ox cart.

The force of the impact caused her father, Roasaheb Bhosale, to fly forward, over the two oxen and onto the road, where he was struck by another vehicle.

The shock of his death caused her mother, who is deaf and mute, to go into labor prematurely. Arpita Bhosale was born a month early.

“But God was able to use my father’s death to lead my mother to Jesus,” Bhosale said in an interview at the Alate Seventh-day Adventist School, located about 20 miles (30 kilometers) from Kohlapur, a bustling city of more than one million people.

Bhosale spent the first few months of her life in the hospital with her mother, Akkatai. Both she and her mother were sickly. The grave situation worried her mother’s brother, Satish, who visited the hospital daily.

One Saturday when Satish arrived to encourage his sister, he saw a stranger going from bed to bed, praying with the patients. Satish curiously approached the man and learned that he was an Adventist pastor.

“My uncle was Hindu,” Bhosale said. “But he was desperate to help my mother, so he asked the pastor to pray for her.”

The pastor prayed for both the woman and her baby. Satish used sign language to interpret the pastor’s words to his sister.

As the pastor visited the mother and baby regularly, the pair started to recover. Amazed, Satish quizzed the pastor about his faith, Bhosale said. After several months of Bible study, both Satish and his sister were baptized. The mother dedicated her daughter to the Lord and, from the time when the child began to talk, taught her to pray at 7 P.M. daily.

“Every day at 7 P.M. I fold my hands and pray no matter where I am,” said Bhosale, now a seventh-grade dormitory student at the Alate Adventist School, which received funds to build a new classroom building from the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in third quarter 2017. “I’ve been doing this for as long as I can remember.”

Bhosale herself was baptized at 13.

“I decided to be baptized because I’ve seen how Jesus has blessed my family through the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” Bhosale said. “I want to follow Jesus because of my mother’s life story. I’ve seen everything that Jesus has done for her.”



ARPITA BHOSALE is a 14-year-old student at an Adventist school in western India.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 13:22*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the deceitfulness of riches and consumerism, thus enabling him or her to escape Satan's grasp.

Feel: Experience self-control or, better still, God's control in the areas of desires, wants, and ambitions.

Do: Develop plans for a lifestyle that is centered on contentment and gratitude for God's generous provision.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Recognizing Deceitful Riches

A Why is it so easy to pass judgment regarding the possessions others accumulate, yet be so blind when it comes to our own spiritual condition?

B Why has the prosperity gospel of many televangelists been so successful in diverting the attention of the church away from making disciples to accumulating wealth?

C What are the three steps in the process of coveting?

II. Feel: Experiencing Self-Control

A How can we experience the Holy Spirit's control over our wants and desires when discontent is everywhere we turn?

B What attitudes about life can nourish the gentle and meek spirit that naturally fosters contentment?

III. Do: Planning a Contented Life

A What are the essential elements of a lifestyle plan that will perpetuate a contented life?

B How can we separate needs from wants, necessities from preferences, or basics from embellishments?

C What are some fundamental daily practices that should be incorporated into one's lifestyle in order to implement successfully a godly lifestyle plan?

► **Summary:** To replace greed with contentment, we must make those choices that allow God full control over our lives.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 13:22*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The deceitfulness of riches will inevitably overtake us if we are not daily surrendered to the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Just for Teachers: This week’s study furthers the themes introduced in our prior study, focusing now on the emotional impact of materialism: dissatisfaction, discontent, greediness, coveting, fantasizing about (and loving) material things. What study could be more appropriate for the age in which we live? Regarding the last days, Jesus warned: “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life” (*Luke 21:34, NIV, emphasis supplied*). While adultery and murder have never been acceptable parts of the Christian lifestyle, other destructive sins have assumed more acceptable guises, such as greed and covetousness. Only the work of the Holy Spirit is capable of rescuing us from this self-deceit.

Opening Discussion: Compare the following two stories: The first story is about a man who was relatively healthy. He exercised regularly, watched what he ate, and looked a little younger than his actual age. Many considered him a model of health. He probably should have gotten more sleep, and he indulged his sweet tooth more often than not, but, generally, he seemed in good shape. His wife urged him to get a professional checkup periodically, but he either did not have the time or did not see the need and refused. Little did he realize that something was taking place in his body that would eventually kill him. By the time his cancer was detected, it was already stage 4. It was too late to save him.

Another man, whose health was not quite as good, paid attention to his aches and pains and sought a doctor’s advice. Tests revealed a cancerous growth at stage 1. Vigorous, and sometimes painful, treatment was applied, saving the man’s life. How important is it that the sinful diseases of materialism and worldly conformity be diagnosed early before they become deadly?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Covetousness and greed have oftentimes compromised the Christian’s witness and diverted resources that might otherwise

have been invested in God's cause. When these ills are allowed to flourish in the believers' lives undetected, human energy and financial resources are misused for selfish purposes. The saddest part of all is that these sins are *undetected*. Murderers know they have killed. Adulterers know their sins. But very often the covetous and greedy live in "blissful ignorance" of their sinfulness. Only careful examination of our motives and practices, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can reveal our true condition. The Laodicean church thought itself rich and prosperous when, in reality, it was pitiable, spiritually poor, and *blind to its true condition*.

Bible Commentary

I. Distorted Theology and Practice *(Review Matthew 13:3–7, 22 with the class.)*

Jesus presents a picture of spiritual life in Matthew 13:3–7 that opens with tremendous promise but fizzles with disappointing outcomes. No chance exists for the first group mentioned in this passage, because there is no spiritual receptivity (the birds eat the seed). The second group fares better but lacks adequate resources to grow the seed beyond a sprout. The third group has spiritual receptivity *and* the resources needed for growth; but before it grows, those resources are diverted into materialism, and spiritual things are choked out.

The best gardens are those in which the gardener has taken the time to weed carefully. Otherwise, the weeds steal the nutrients intended for the vegetable plant, and it is either starved or choked out. Unfortunately, there is a popular strain of theology that cultivates selfishness under the guise of building faith. Known as prosperity theology, this false theology, like any good counterfeit, contains some truth that is carefully woven together with deceit. God does want us to prosper (*3 John 2*) and has materially blessed many believers throughout history (Abraham, Job, and Boaz, to name a few). The problem is that this theology teaches that our giving somehow obligates God to make us rich. The more we give, the more we get. The believer is motivated to give not out of spiritual principle, but by the selfish desire to get more money.

Consider This: What is it about the nature of materialism that makes it more difficult to detect than other sins? How is prosperity theology potentially damaging to the church?

II. The Steps of Covetousness *(Review Genesis 3:1–6 with the class.)*

The lesson identifies three distinct steps every person takes when falling into covetousness.

First, we behold and fixate upon an object of desire, as our text for review illustrates. For example, Satan baits Eve with a display of the forbidden fruit, thus enticing her. Had Eve closed her eyes and immediately turned away, the entire course of human history would have been redirected. Our first defense is to look away. Potiphar's wife's infatuation with Joseph began as she "cast her *eyes* on Joseph" (*Gen. 39:7, NRSV, emphasis supplied*). The believer's infatuation with materialism likewise begins with "eye casting." James writes, "One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin" (*James 1:14, 15, NRSV*). The secret to overcoming material temptation is to look away before it becomes sin. Jesus graphically underscored the importance of "eye control." He said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (*Matt. 5:29, NRSV*).

The second step is wanting. The ad company is not satisfied with showing you something. The industry spends millions researching how to make you want it. Will owning that item make you feel more valued and adored? Will it satisfy some basic longing for nourishment, sexual intimacy, or physical comfort? How can Christians withstand this manipulation that is funded by millions, if not billions, of dollars? The answers are found in a small book that can be purchased at many thrift stores for 50 cents: the Bible. James tells us to "submit to God" and to "draw near to God" (*James 4:7, 8, NKJV*). These foundations enable the actions he then proposes: (1) resist the devil, (2) cleanse your hands, and (3) purify your hearts (*James 4:7, 8, NKJV*).

It is not enough, however, to protect the perimeter of the soul. Jesus suggested that the inside must be filled (*Matt. 12:43–45*). The void that materialism often fills must be occupied with spiritual realities. "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (*Col. 3:2, NRSV*). Our desire for heavenly realities guards against an obsession with material things.

The final step of falling into covetousness is the action step, the purchase point: I take. Even if we have compromised the first two, there is still hope. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (*Phil. 4:13, NKJV*). Rather than taking, we can focus our energies on giving, as Christ gave and in the way He commanded us to give. (*See 1 John 3:16, 17 and Matt. 25:31–46.*)

Consider This: Why is it easier to turn away from greed at the first step rather than the third?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The practice of scriptural meditation, prayer, and

Christian service forms barriers against our natural tendencies toward covetousness. Through self-control—which, for the Christian, is nothing less than completely surrendering to divine control—our thoughts, passions, and energies may be directed to use God’s material blessings in accordance with His will. We must remember that God’s creation of material things invests them with His blessing. These are not inherently evil. When we worship God’s creation instead of worshiping God Himself, it is then that problems arise.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ Because self-control is essentially the surrender to divine control, what practical things might be done to clear away obstacles to the Holy Spirit?
- ❷ How might the cultivation of other spiritual gifts contribute to the development of the self-control that is needed to overcome covetousness?
- ❸ What are some useful approaches for applying self-control to each of the three steps that lead to covetousness?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: One way that believers “set their minds on things above” to fill the space occupied by materialism is to focus on Jesus. One way to focus on Jesus is to share the good news and care for “the least of these” (*Matt. 25:40*), for by so doing we are serving Jesus Himself. Plan activities that help us focus on Jesus through service.

Activities:

Church Ministry:

- ❶ Ask the pastor for a list of people who cannot attend church because of physical infirmity. Pay them a visit.
- ❷ Offer to organize a fun-filled outing for younger children in the church.
- ❸ Assist your Pathfinder leaders by cleaning and organizing their equipment.

Individual Activities:

- ❶ Prepare and serve food at a homeless shelter.
- ❷ Organize a fund-raising activity for a local nonprofit organization.
- ❸ Help a local family or agency to refurbish a house for the needy.
- ❹ Visit and encourage people at your local prison.