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WEALTH AND POVERTY

# Releasing the Grip of Materialism

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JEREMY BELL | SEPTEMBER 06, 2018



Did you know the Japanese are the second largest unreached people group (UPG) in the world? You might assume that UPGs live in places hostile to the gospel or regions that are cut off from the rest of the world. Japan is neither. It remains an open country and protects freedom of religion. When I preached at a church in Tokyo this summer, I did not have to fear being imprisoned (or worse) for proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation (Acts 2:12).



access to the gospel. In fact, our team had the privilege to visit and worship with two different Japanese churches in Tokyo. So, why has faith not been embraced by this people group?

Now, I'm no expert on Japanese culture. But I observed one potential barrier for many Japanese to accept the gospel — and it's an obstacle we face in America, too.

### **Materialism.**

The idol of materialism amplified by consumerist cultures is an obstacle for millions of people to believe the gospel. In Japan, I learned that many people will buy what their heart desires. Even if they can't afford it, they will go into debt to get it. For example, if a person becomes interested in cycling, he or she may buy top-level equipment to begin their cycling endeavor. We Americans are no different.

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**The love of possessions hinders many people from surrendering everything to follow Jesus.**

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## **Battling Materialism**

We must confront the idol of materialism in Japan, America and anywhere else through the lens of the gospel. Combating materialism is essentially battling for the heart, and the only weapon with which to do battle is the good news of Jesus Christ.



honored his father and mother. Who wouldn't want a son or daughter like that? Yet, Jesus's words shook him to the core of his heart. Jesus asked him to go sell everything, give to the poor "and come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). The ruler's response was shocking: "When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Matthew 19:22). Given the choice between his stuff and his Savior, he chose his stuff.

Today, the rich young ruler's idolatry is pervasive. The love of possessions hinders many people from surrendering everything to follow Jesus. Of course, materials are not inherently evil. God created the material world, after all. Rather, Jesus is addressing the *love* of materials. The idol of materialism is a battle for the heart across the Western world.

What answer do Christians possess to combat the idol of materialism? The gospel has the most adequate response to this heart condition. Jesus was asking the rich young ruler to give up his possessions so that he would embrace Jesus with his entire heart, soul, mind and strength (Matthew 22:37). Jesus taught that to trust in his perfect life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection provides the means for receiving the abundant riches and treasures associated with the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:44). When a person gives up everything to follow Jesus — including their possessions — they receive an even greater reward, possession and treasure: *Jesus Christ himself*.

No possession in this world comes close to the riches of being in a relationship with Jesus Christ. When the heart turns to Christ, an individual begins to recognize the supremacy of the unconditional love of Jesus. Your stuff will never love you back, but Jesus Christ shows his love for us in that he died for our sins. The gospel compels a person's



## Saying “Yes” to Something Better

Therefore, in materialistic cultures, the church must convey to people that those who give up everything in this world for Christ “will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29). Yes, they will be saying *no* to one thing, but they will be saying *yes* to something far better.

At the same time, we must realize that we aren’t guiltless when it comes to the sin of materialism. We Christians must carefully guard our hearts from embracing a love for possessions, and we must be a witness to the watching world that our love for Jesus Christ supersedes any love we have for our possessions. May our love for Jesus turn the eyes of the lost in order that we might give them a reason for the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15).

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