

Materialism Is Easy to Decry and Hard to Avoid

December 16, 2019 Kathy Keller

The Christmas season is an easy target to attack for its rampant materialism. We enter the new year emotionally and financially exhausted, both corporately and individually. I'm not going to disagree with that assessment.

However . . .

Most people think materialism is the desire for many things, or expensive things, or unique things, or all three. But the truth is you can be a materialist at any income level (or none). All that's required is you look to the material comforts of *this* world for your happiness.

Heart of Materialism

C. S. Lewis exposed the breadth of gluttony in his famous *Screwtape Letters* by showing that a sinful relationship to food doesn't only take the form of overindulgence. Sometimes it's just an insistence on "a cup of tea, weak, but not too weak,

and the teeniest weeniest bit of really crisp toast”—no matter what has been offered (Letter XVII).

Similarly, materialism doesn't only express itself in a desire for enormous quantity or superb quality of this world's goods, but by locating happiness in the things of this world. You may have no craving for designer fashion or statement jewelry or cars or yachts or other symbols of elite status. But ask yourself this: *how much of my contentment is based on this world providing me with [fill in the blank]*? Fitting into my size-6 clothes (even if I bought them at Century 21). Being able to take the family out to Shake Shack without counting pennies. The affection of a pet. Not losing the light and view from my windows because a new building is blocking them. And so on.

Losing such commonplace comforts will always cause a degree of regret, but will it overthrow your happiness? If so, you are a materialist. Materialism simply means that your happiness, joy, contentment, and satisfaction is tied to something in *this* material world. A salary, however small. Status, however low. Possessions, however modest or threadbare. If our hearts are inordinately tied to these things, beyond just the affection we feel for the familiar, then we are materialists.

And since this world is passing away, materialism is in the same category as building your house on the sand, or eating food that does not satisfy. It is doomed to ultimate failure.

The old proverb “You can’t take it with you” could be expanded to read “You can’t even hold onto it in this world.” When sorrow, or age, or other loss robs us of those material comforts, we materialists have nothing left.

True Joy in His Kingdom

Only if we have learned to locate our joy in God’s kingdom, presence, and love are we safe. As Paul counsels the Corinthians, don’t be overly discouraged by trials and loss; rather, “fix your eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” ([2 Cor. 4:18](#)).

Everything that strips us of dependence on this world is to be welcomed. The old saints called it “being weaned from the world.” No child welcomes the day they are weaned, and it’s impossible to make them understand the glories of ice cream and strawberries and lasagna and guacamole that will be theirs if only they graduate from the temporary to the permanent.

So it is with us. We cling to what cannot satisfy, nor even last, instead of walking by faith as citizens of heaven and enjoying the security of an inheritance that can never be shaken. Worse, when God, in his mercy, takes steps to wean us from our unhealthy dependence on this world, we accuse him of injustice, or unkindness, or lack of love—just as would a

nursing child, if she had the words, when the comfort of her mother's breast is removed and food (oh, icky!) is substituted.

I confess my own materialism. My furniture may be decades old, my wardrobe ordered from catalogs, my carpets unraveling at the edges and bare in the middle, but they are *mine*, and the life I've woven around me is one I don't care to have changed in even the slightest particular. At my core I *want* to want to see God's face, and to live in joy with him eternally; just, you understand, without having anything change.

God, save me from my materialism. God, save us all, and fit us for your kingdom, where we will live in joy with you forever.