Max Martin leaned back in his plush office chair, savoring the moment. The computer printout in his hand told the story—a very good story. His construction business had been doing well, and his financial investments were paying off handsomely. He had worked hard—very hard—to put himself and his business on the map. He took advantage of financial situations to improve his position. He wanted it all regardless of who he stepped on to get it. And now it was time to enjoy the fruits of his labors.

Of course, he’d need to reinvest much of his earnings to avoid higher taxes, he reminded himself. But this would be a good time to move his business headquarters from the small second-floor office to a larger, more central location—a suite that would let the world know that he had arrived.

A smile crept across his face as he thought about his new Corvette and the condo on the beach. All the things he had accumulated needed a better place, so now his family could start looking for that bigger home they clamored for—one that would include a pool and tennis court. If only the church would stop nagging him for money, reminding him that God wanted 10 percent plus freewill offerings. He would not mind giving if they would manage the money better.

He reached for his phone and called his investment advisor.
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This would be a good year, a very good year. He had worked so hard for so long. He had sacrificed time with his family, grabbing meals on the run, often meeting clients well into the night. Now he could let others do the hard work while he reaped the rewards.

Two days later, the newspaper carried the story. Max Martin had died of a heart attack. The story recounted how he had enjoyed the good things of life. His estate consisted of seven properties, a vintage car collection, and his prize racehorse named Generosity. But now he was gone; his dreams had turned to ashes.

Materialism

Thanks to modern technology, materialism has brought the wonder of “getting stuff” to the most remote parts of the world. However, psychological studies of financial status in different cultures have shown in every case that “materialists were less satisfied with their family, their friends, their self-perception, where they lived, their health, the amount of fun and enjoyment they experienced, the money they made, and their jobs.”²

While possessions can affect us negatively, living a simple life offers at least two major benefits: freedom and the opportunity to give. These benefits strengthen our relationships and turn our attention from ourselves to others.

One of Merriam-Webster’s definitions for materialism is “a way of thinking that gives too much importance to material possessions rather than to spiritual or intellectual things.” The possessions that we have acquired often determine our sense of status and the actual value system we live by. So that you understand better what we are grappling with, here are seven essential features of materialism defined.

1. Money. Materialism is the result of our love affair with money. There is no limit to greed and covetousness, and it can have a numbing influence on a Christian. Money is the façade that hides Satan’s true identity. He has elevated it so that people make it the god of this world; but it is only a demi-god. It has power but not ultimate power.

When a person handles money, their brain produces the same
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chemical that is produced when a person takes drugs. People fight for money, gamble to get it, and lie, cheat, and steal to hold on to it. Some call it “brain candy,” and they just can’t get enough of this artificial sweet, because with it they can buy stuff. They imagine it will make them secure. People, rich and poor alike, spend their lives chasing the dream of prosperity. Some attain it, but many spend their lives wishing for it.

2. Consumerism. If materialism is the religion, then consumerism is the sanctuary in which we meet to worship. Consumerism is the never-ending cycle of acquiring more stuff. We never get enough, no matter how much we have. Just observe houses in different neighborhoods. Some have no garage, while others have a one-car, two-car, or three-car garage—all full of stuff. Storage units are packed with possessions, much of it simply junk. Homes are full to capacity. Yet retailers want us to buy more.

Retailers are very good at separating us from our money. They want each of us to become a consumer from the cradle to the grave. They use every method known to understand our purchasing whims and work nonstop to make us want more—now. They know that if we don’t buy right now, we might not buy. Giving customers what they want is achieved by mass-producing products with the ability of individual customization. One example is the smartphone, which is almost endlessly customizable.

Consumerism is often moralized and spiritualized as a positive idea, but it is the mechanism that keeps a dangerous materialism alive. Consumerism promises (falsely) that possessions will bring us happiness, success, social status, and an affluence-enhanced individuality.

Accumulating possessions is not new. The rich young ruler could not bear to part with his possessions (Matthew 19:16–22). Lot’s wife left her possessions, the accumulated wealth of many years, in Sodom, along with her heart (Genesis 19:26). “She rebelled against God because His judgments involved her possessions and her children in the ruin. . . . She presumptuously looked back [to Sodom] to desire the life of those who had rejected the divine warning.”

The New English Translation draws attention to the power of
possessions. “Because all that is in the world (the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the arrogance produced by material possessions) is not from the Father, but is from the world” (1 John 2:16, NET). In comparison, think of Job. He was wealthy, but he never allowed possessions, or a lack thereof, to destroy his relationship with God.

3. Television. People watch a lot of television. Some research indicates that it cuts the average life span for women by 1.5 years and for men by 1.8 years. While television can be a wonderful tool in the work of the Lord, it also can be the evangelistic arm of materialism.

In the 1950s, the components of consumerism were set: a home, vehicles, retailers, and television. The home needed possessions, the retailers had the products, television advertised the products, and the vehicle provided the means to get the products to the house. Now there are hundreds of channels on which retailers are able to market products. Perhaps someday, drones will deliver them to your house.

Advertising reaches us through our senses—our eyes and ears. The images are attractive, the words are chosen carefully, and the music is specifically chosen to make a product enticing. Advertisers use jingles with humor and surprise and other ways to attract and hold our attention for a brief period of time. Products are branded by playing the commercial over and over. Retailers consider their brand successful when all they have to do is show a logo, as in Starbucks or Coca Cola, and people recognize the product.

Advertising affects the amount of junk food eaten, alcohol consumed, and many other aspects of how we live. Especially harmful is the influence on the young, who see about 40,000 commercials per year, according to the journal Pediatrics. The danger is that children can’t always discern between reality and fantasy because their cognitive powers are not fully developed. Commercials are a small but influential part of viewing habits. It is important that we follow David’s counsel, “I will not look with approval on anything that is vile. I hate what faithless people do; I will have no part in it” (Psalm 101:3).
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4. Sensuality. Satan adds glamour to lure people down an attractive road that numbs them to eternal realities. No other story in the Bible demonstrates the sensual side of materialism better than that of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ellen White explains the link. “There is nothing more desired among men than riches and leisure, and yet these gave birth to the sins that brought destruction upon the cities of the plain.”

Looking at sensual things influences our thoughts and actions. However, “one of the main reasons individuals have unrealistic ideals about wealth and possessions is that they frequently view such images in the media.” Retailers know this and use sensuality more than any other way to sell their products. Sensuality is the perfect complement to successful materialism, even when a spokesperson and a product have little or nothing in common. We are led to think life will be better or happier or that we will have a more satisfying relationship or encounter if we can just obtain a certain product. Of course, this is false reasoning, but it is used time and again to sell products. Retailers know that sex sells, and within the marketing industry it is called “the concept.” One philosopher stated, “Sex is the mysticism of materialism.” Just look up the TV commercial “Never TOO Timeless.” It illustrates perfectly how sensuality can sell a water faucet.

Sensuality is a fleeting, subjective experience. It asks no questions and makes no judgments; yet it is not content until it succeeds in self-indulgence. Giving in to its allure results in opposition to God (2 Peter 2:10) and offers “acts of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19). Without prayer, our thoughts will naturally turn sensual (1 Corinthians 7:5). When we pray, our thoughts turn heavenward.

5. Greed. Materialism can turn even prayer into greed. Greed is the fuel that keeps pulling us back to material things. Jesus sets our possessions in the context of how we will stand before God when He points out the connection between greed and our possessions. “Then he said to them, ‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions’ ” (Luke 12:15). The rich man did not see his selfishness in building bigger barns (Luke 12:16–20). Jesus states the ultimate antidote in verse 31—seek the kingdom of God.
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6. Narcissism. Materialism has the characteristics of a cult and is the perfect garden to grow narcissism; that is, becoming self-focused and egocentric. When allowed to flourish, narcissism will cunningly hide the truth while the image of selfishness is perfected. Possessions and wealth can make us think we are something we’re not. Narcissism includes the personality traits of a fallen angel (2 Corinthians 11:14). In Isaiah 14:13, 14, Satan made five narcissistic statements:

“I will ascend to the heavens;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.”

This kind of self-ambitious narcissism is the opposite of Paul’s comment to “value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3–5). “If we empathize with other people to the point of merging our own identities with theirs, we care about them as much as we care about ourselves. Because we no longer place our interests above theirs, helping them is purely altruistic.” Moses showed altruism in his prayer. “But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exodus 32:32). Later, Jesus demonstrated the ultimate altruism, and it led Him to the cross, where He died for us so that we could have a home in heaven.

7. Hoarding. Materialism is a progressive “religion” and ultimately leads to hoarding. The connection between the idea of ownership and possessions is more significant in this process than the number of possessions one owns. This problem is found almost everywhere in the world. A sense of ownership relates directly to identity, and a hoarder’s identity is found in their possessions, which consume their life. We’re not talking about the psychiatric disorder, but rather who or what we identity with—our possessions, or Christ?
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Hoard ing is an irrational perversion of management. It is the opposite of stewardship and the ultimate futility of the materialist’s utopian dream, because possessions can rust and decay. “Love of self has led you to prefer earthly possessions even at the sacrifice of the heavenly. You choose the treasures that moth and rust corrupt rather than those which are as enduring as eternity.”10 We must blend our identity with Christ. Everything we live for is centered in Jesus. Paul stated clearly that Christ “is our life” (Colossians 3:4, KJV), and we are “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11).

The antidote for materialism

Many would say that the antidote to the materialism described in this chapter is “giving.” But even giving can be selfish. The giver and the gift can be corrupted. Givers can have wrong motives and give to the wrong cause.

The call of Elisha shows the opposite of what happened with the rich young ruler. Elisha left his wealth and in the end asked only for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2:9–11). How can one have this kind of true unselfishness? The real antidote is obtained “‘not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6). “Might” refers to a big army, and “power” refers to a single warrior hero. The biggest army, the best books on psychology, or our closest family members cannot outweigh materialism’s power over us. The strongest hero—a mentor, pastor, or spiritual guardian—is not strong enough to help us overcome materialism. The attraction of materialism is vanquished only by the Spirit of God. So simply turning to “giving” is not the antidote. We can only triumph over what this world has to offer when we allow God’s Spirit to align our thoughts and actions with His loving and unselfish character.

1. Not his real name.
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