

# What is a Biblical Lifestyle?

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[ 0 : 00 ] The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, I love that name, once told a story about a group of thieves that broke in one night to a jewellery store.

But they didn't take anything. Instead, they just switched all the price tags on the jewellery. Next day, the shop opened and things looked a little bit different, but nobody could quite work out what had happened.

So it was business as usual, except it wasn't, because for the rest of the day, people were leaving that store in a number of different ways.

People had gone in thinking, having spent a lot of money, thinking that they were coming out with very valuable jewels, whereas in fact they were going away with all the cheap stuff. On the other hand, there were the people that couldn't afford the great treasures and had spent very little.

In fact, they were coming out of the store with the most valuable, precious things of all. Our world places value on material wealth.

[ 1 : 06 ] It places value on money and the security that money promises. There's nothing new about that. But the gospel calls us to think again.

The gospel reverses those values. It's like when Jesus comes on the scene and everything that Jesus and his kingdom that he promises represents, it's like all of those price tags in life have been suddenly jumbled up.

Everything is turned upside down. If you get a pot of water and you boil a kettle and you fill the pot of water with boiling hot water from the kettle, and then you get a live frog and drop the frog in the boiling water, the frog will, or at least it will try to escape the boiling water.

However, if you get the same pot and you fill it with cold water, and you get the frog and drop it into the water, it will be quite happy because it's nice and cool.

But if you then put it on the hob and then gradually bring it to boiling point, the frog won't actually notice until it's too late. Why? Well, because the frog's instincts are geared towards detecting sudden change, not gradual.

[ 2 : 43 ] Now, as I share that with you, let me tell you a couple of things. Firstly, while I have a number of different hobbies, frog boiling isn't one of them. So I haven't actually tried this out.

I read about it. But secondly, let me tell you why I share that with you. It's this. You see, I think probably most of us, probably all of us, would to some degree or another, agree with the proposition that actually, of all the different things in life that could be important to us, money, whilst it might be important at times, is not the most important thing.

And actually, I don't think it's just Christians that would go along with that belief. I think actually most people would, to some extent, agree with some of that.

That would say actually, you know, okay, whilst we might prize money and the things that it offers, and whilst we might think that material possessions might be quite important, they're not the most important thing.

I think most human beings would actually probably go along with at least some of that. But the thing is, we must hold that in principle, but we live in a world, and I ought to say, there's nothing new about this.

[ 4 : 09 ] It's as old as time itself. We live in a world in which we're surrounded with a conflicting message, and it's ever so subtle. And it's a message that actually says the very opposite, that the most important things are actually the pursuit of wealth, and the pursuit of financial security, and the peace of mind that that can bring.

And it's actually the accumulation of possessions, those things that actually really matter. Now, whilst maybe most of us, Christian or not, would want to distance ourselves from the bold claim that

actually money is everything, the reality is different.

So whilst we might have in our minds and in our hearts this conviction that actually money is not the most important thing, when we then find ourselves in the culture that surrounds us, our sensitivities may not be tuned in always to what's going on.

And you don't have to go very far to hear an advertising message or a claim or something. It comes up in conversation, where we're led into this climate that actually says that, you know, material stuff is rather more important than we actually want to think it is.

And the pursuit of wealth, actually it's something that perhaps we ought to be thinking a bit about more. And it's subtle when we don't notice it, and we don't notice it because we become desensitized because we are exposed to it and its subtlety all the time.

[ 5 : 49 ] We need to be aware of it. And that is certainly what Paul was trying to say. In 1 Timothy, it's one of the, what is known in the New Testament as the pastoral letters, pastoral epistles, that were written from one church leader to another.

And here Paul writes to Timothy as a church leader to another church leader, saying to him of a number of, addressing a number of different pastoral issues, life issues that he can encounter as one who's been put in charge of leading a church.

And Paul is saying to him about the importance of remembering the life that we're called to as Christians and how our attitude to wealth and material possessions fits into all of that.

And so he says this, let me read it to you again. Command those who are rich in this present world, not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Notice that he begins that by saying, command those who are rich. Now, in listening to this, we might be very tempted, ever so tempted to think, well, that's okay, because I don't really fall into that category.

[ 7 : 07 ] So I can kind of listen in on this, but these words clearly aren't targeted directly to me myself. I'd want to challenge that. And the reason I want to challenge it is certainly in 2018, in the UK, we can probably safely say that by virtue of living in the UK in 2018, it is highly likely that we are part of the richest 20% of the world's population.

We can look at all sorts of statistics that will actually confirm that. The point is, it's a very basically simple one, but it's a really important one. If we think that these words don't apply to us because we're not really wealthy in the sense that Paul was writing to Timothy here, actually, we need to think again, because we are.

In global terms, we are stinking rich. So we need to bear in mind that these words are definitely, definitely for us. But it's not just Paul's words to Timothy that say this.

Jesus says the same things. In fact, Jesus had more to say about the themes of money and wealth than he had to say about pretty much anything else, even prayer and faith. Time and time again, he told stories to draw attention to that theme.

One of the most well-known stories that Jesus told was the parable of the sower. And he said the kingdom of God and its operation, it's growing or not growing within the world, has about it similar dynamics of, if you can imagine, somebody going out to plant seed.

[ 8 : 43 ] And as they plant seed, some of the seed falls on stony ground, some of it falls on good soil, some of it, some of it, he says, falls among thorns. And then as the seeds begin to grow, so the thorns grow up around them, and the thorns choke those plants from growing.

And then Jesus says this. He says that the thorns in that story, and it's one of the few parables that Jesus then went on and actually explained to his disciples the meaning of.

Most of the time, Jesus didn't do that. He just let people work it out for themselves. But here's one where he was asked, what does that story mean? And he went on to say, he said, the thorns represent the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth as things that can choke the growth of God's word and God's plans within our lives.

Notice that Jesus doesn't just say the thorns represent wealth, but he says the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth are both things that can choke our growth in God.

You see, the point is, is whether when you think of money and possessions, it's something that worries you because it's something that you haven't got, or whether it's because when you think of it, actually you think, yeah, I've got so much, and you're really wealthy because it's something you have got.

[10:16] It doesn't really matter. The point is, is those things, whether it's things we worry about or things that actually we just accumulate and that we have, they're equally dangerous. They can choke, to come back to that image, just like a thorn choking the growth of a plant.

These things, whether they're things we worry about or things that we just go after all the time, they can choke our growth. Whether we have wealth or whether we don't have wealth, it's the preoccupation with it that is the point that Jesus addressed and which Paul is addressing in his letter to Timothy.

So what are the dangers? Well, isolate two of these things, and if you've read the book that our current series is based on, or if you're reading it or if you're following it in your growth group, giving, unlocking the heart of good stewardship, then if you're reading this, then you may have already read this section that I'm about to read to you.

Because in this book, the writer says that there are two key dangers when it comes to the theme of wealth and possessions.

The first danger is materialism. Materialism being a sense of preoccupation with owning and accumulating stuff.

[11:43] Whether we're talking about possessions over what we've got, or whether we're talking about worrying about what we haven't got. The theme remains the same. It means the preoccupation with those things.

Let me read to you. According to Webster's New College Dictionary, materialism is defined as, I quote, a theory that physical matter is the only or fundamental reality, that the highest values or objectives lie in material well-being.

He goes on to say, materialism begins with what we believe. Not merely what we say we believe, but the philosophy of life we actually live by.

Hence, while any true Christian would deny belief in the philosophical underpinnings of materialism, they couldn't be a Christian if they didn't, they may nonetheless be preoccupied with material rather than spiritual things, and therefore, in fact, be a practicing materialist.

Practicing materialists may say whatever they wish about the spiritual realm. They may go to church every week, serve communion or preach, but if they center their lives around the accumulation of things, they are, despite their most heated denials, materialists.

[13:16] And a question that I think that presents each and every one of us with is what might that look like in terms of our own lives. Yes, we may lay hold to that principle that it's not material things that matter, that we believe that it is the spiritual that is most important, but how does that translate into reality?

When we leave this place, when we face the rest of our lives, when we go into our workplaces, when we go into the shops, when we go online, when we pick up our iPads, our laptops, or whatever, what is it that actually drives us?

What is it that preoccupies us? What does our lifestyle actually spell out? Not just what we say we think we believe, but what does the reality of our lives look like?

Honestly, when we think about the things that preoccupy us and the things that set the map, the direction for our lives throughout the week. That's the first danger.

Materialism, a sense of preoccupation with things material and the accumulation of or the worry about those things. Whether we've actually got them or not, what is it that we spend our time thinking about most?

[14:30] The second danger, the second danger when it comes to this is what we might call asceticism. If materialism is a preoccupation with or worry over accumulating things, asceticism means the preoccupation with denying the good immaterial stuff.

And in its extreme form it can lead to a mindset whereby I think, well, we must never ever enjoy ourselves. We must never have that sort of thing because it's almost bad to ever spend any money or it's bad to have anything for ourselves.

There's a story that's told, a wonderful story about a farmer, his wife was approaching a round figure birthday and he thought he wanted to treat her but he didn't really want to spend that much money.

He knew that for years off and on she'd mentioned how she'd always fancied going up in one of those open cockpit planes. So he went over to an airport that he knew of and managed to talk to somebody who had one of these open cockpit planes with seats in it.

One for the pilot and then another one behind that for the first passenger and then one behind that for another passenger. And he made inquiries and said he would really like to treat his wife to a trip up in one of these on her birthday.

[16:00] And he said, yeah, we can do that for you. When is it? And sure enough that was convenient for that particular day. He said, how much would it be? They said, 500 pounds. He said, you're joking. He said, I want to speak to the pilot.

Well, eventually they managed to get the pilot to come out and he said, I'd like to do this for my wife for a birthday but there's no way I'm paying 500 pounds. He said, well, how much were you wanting to spend?

He said, how about 50? He said, you're joking. He said, I'm not doing that. He said, no, that's how much I'm prepared to spend. The pilot thought really quickly.

He said, I'll tell you what, I'll take you up for 50 pounds. For half an hour. But on one condition. That when we're up, your wife and yourself, neither of you must make a single sound.

I don't want you here to shriek or holler out anything. If you can remain completely quiet for the full half hour of the flight, flight, then I'll let you have it for 50 pounds.

[17:01] What he didn't tell him was he was actually a bit of a stunt pilot. So the farmer wanted to grab the deal, he said, I'll tell you what it's on. I'll give you a 50 quid cash now. And provided we fulfill what you've just said, then that's it.

If we do make a sound, either of us during the course of the flight, well, then we owe you another 450. They shook hands, deal was done. Day of the birthday, the flight came around.

The husband told his wife what he had done, what he had arranged. Obviously didn't mention any of the conversation that had taken place.

And she was delighted. So they arrived at the airport, got to the plane, got on board, and the pilot started off.

And they went up into the sky, and this pilot was determined that he was going to win this one. Up he went, looped the loop, up, down, tumbled around, through this thing all over the place to the point that the actual pilot was getting scared.

[18:07] And yet to his astonishment, over half an hour of stunt after stunt after stunt, there was not a sound from the back. And eventually he decided he would have to just cut his loss.

So he was just coming into land, and as he did so, he shouted back to the farmer. He said, well, I guess you win. It's 50 pounds, that's it, you don't know me anymore.

And just as he was touching the ground, the farmer shouted back to him, he said, you almost won, you almost won. I almost shouted when my wife fell out.

we might think it's a good thing to try and cling hold of every last thing.

We might think there's something virtuous about it, but it's not a truly authentically biblical approach to wealth, to money, and to possessions.

[19:08] Christians. And in fact, we haven't got time to go into detail, but when we look at the whole scriptural narrative, the story of the Old Testament of people of God, and the whole culture into which Jesus came, and which Jesus indeed affirmed, it was a culture that liked to party, that liked to feast.

We see so many of the festivals in the Hebrew tradition, because they were a people that actually would celebrate the goodness of life in the material world, and would do so lavishly.

So asceticism, when it means that sense of despising the material, and being suspicious of any sense of embracing wealth as a good thing, it misses what is essentially at the heart of what Paul is talking about here.

There is the danger of preoccupation. preoccupation in the material sense of things, where we only ever think about either accumulating more stuff, or we worry about the stuff that we don't have.

Or there can be the preoccupation that effectively translates as denying any goodness in anything material. Paul says, guard what has been entrusted to your care.

[20:29] Guard what has been entrusted to your care. See, wealth brings with it responsibility.

What we have, and we may think it's a lot, we may not think it's a lot. Globally, it is a lot. What we have carries with it responsibility.

Responsibility to use before God. responsibility before God with the things that he has entrusted us with.

One last story. The composer, Liszt, years ago, was asked to perform at court on the piano before the Russian czar, Nicholas I.

first. And as he was in the middle of his first sonata, he noticed in the corner of his eye that the Russian czar was actually chatting with one of his aides.

[ 21 : 38 ] Liszt continued to play his way through the sonata, but as he noticed that the chatting between the czar and his aide was not stopping.

He found himself more and more irritated. Eventually, Liszt stopped playing midway through the piece and just placed his hands on his lap.

Suddenly, the czar stopped talking. And he sent his aide to inquire what the problem was. Liszt replied, when the czar speaks, everyone should be silent.

There were no more interruptions after that. See, recognising the greatness of that which we are in the presence of changes how we act.

Recognising the goodness, the greatness of that which we have been given and which has been entrusted into us. And recognising not only that we have so much, but recognising that we are allowed to have so much and that God is there and is present in our lives changes the way in which we approach the way we handle those things and the way we live our lives.

[ 23 : 15 ] God, says Paul, what has been entrusted to your care. And so as we pray now, let's do that. Let's reflect on what we have.

Let's reflect on the way in which we tend to approach that which we have. And let's entrust it to God as he has entrusted it to us.

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