Matthew 5:3; Matthew 16:24-26

When the world consumes and controls us, we truly lose sight of Jesus Christ. I have often reflected upon the idea that the acquisition of stuff is one of the greatest obstacles to our serving and being committed to Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke these words that haunt every person who truly wants to serve Jesus Christ with a greater commitment. In **Matthew 16:24-26 Jesus said, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it."**

There lies within each of us two enemies that we contend with on a daily basis. They are called "Life" and "Self," and both desires to be fed. Both are fed on a consistent basis. Both seem to control our relationship with Jesus Christ. We don't intend it to happen; it just does. In order for this not to happen, we must become more vigilant in our walk with Jesus and His word. These two enemies push us into the arena of possessiveness. We want to possess things; we want to control things. We live in a society that promotes gain and profit. Paul tells us, "The love of money is the root of all evil." It pushes us to embrace a value system that is perverted in the eyes of God. Money is not evil; it is the love of it that compels the world to become savage and vicious toward each other. It is when money and its by-products of a life of selfish desire. As well as the pursuit of a life that impresses others but leaves them empty and unaware on the inside. It controls our lives and our desires. The by-products of money are power, position, and riches. These seem to guide the choices of many who

desire to serve Jesus. However, these imposters of peace and happiness seem to rule the day. I want to share a story of two men who discovered that most people around us are pursuing things that have no lasting value. That pursuit is ably treated by Anton Chekhov in his classic short story The Bet. This story gives us great insight into the value system of most people:

The plot involves a wager between two educated men regarding solitary confinement. A wealthy, middle-aged banker believed the death penalty was a more humane penalty than solitary confinement because “an executioner kills at once, solitary confinement kills gradually.” One of his guests at a party, a young lawyer of twenty-five, disagreed, saying, “To live under any conditions is better than not to live at all.”

Angered, the banker impulsively responded with a bet of two million rubles that the younger man could not last five years in solitary confinement. The lawyer was so convinced of his endurance that he announced he would stay fifteen years alone instead of only five.

The arrangements were made, and the young man moved into a separate building on the grounds of the banker’s large estate. He was allowed no visitors or newspapers. He could write letters but receive none. There were guards watching to make sure he never violated the agreement, but they were placed so that he could never see another human being from his windows. He received his food in silence through a small opening where he could not see those who served him. Everything else he wanted—books, certain foods, musical instruments, etc.—was granted by special written request.

During the first year, the piano could be heard at almost any hour, and he asked for many books, mostly novels and other light reading. The next year the music ceased, and the works of various classical authors were requested. In the sixth year of his isolation, he began to study languages and soon had mastered six. After the tenth year of his confinement, the prisoner sat motionless at the table and read the New Testament. After more than a year's saturation of the Bible, he began to study the history of religion and works on theology.

The second half of the story focuses on the night before the noon deadline when the lawyer would win the bet. The banker was now at the end of his career. His risky speculations and impetuosity had gradually undermined his business. The once self-confident millionaire was now a second-rate banker, and it would destroy him to pay off the wager. Angry at his foolishness and jealous of the soon-to-be-wealthy lawyer who was now only forty, the old banker determined to kill his opponent and frame the guard with the murder. Slipping into the man's room, he found him asleep at the table and noticed a letter the lawyer had written to him. He picked it up and read the following:

Tomorrow at twelve o'clock, I shall be free … but before leaving this room … I find it necessary to say a few words to you. With a clear conscience, and before God, who sees me, I declare to you that I despise freedom and life and health and all that your books call the joys of this world … I know I am wiser than you all … And I despise all your books. I despise all earthly blessings and wisdom. All are worthless and false, hollow and deceiving like the mirage. You may be proud, wise, and beautiful, but death will wipe you away from the face of the earth, as it does the mice that live beneath your floor; and your

heirs, your history, your immortal geniuses will freeze or burn with the destruction of the earth. You have gone mad and are not following the right path. You take falsehood for truth and deformity for beauty. To prove to you how I despise all that you value, I renounce the two million on which I looked, at one time, as the opening of paradise for me, and which I now scorn. To deprive myself of the right to receive them, I will leave my prison five hours before the appointed time, and by so doing, break the terms of our contract.

The banker read the lines, replaced the paper on the table, kissed the strange, sleeping man, and with tears in his eyes, quietly left the house. Chekhov writes, “Never before, not even after sustaining serious losses on change, had he despised himself as he did at that moment.” His tears kept him awake for the rest of the night. And at seven the next morning, he was informed by the watchmen that they had seen the man crawl through a window, go to the gate, and then disappear.

Some people must learn the hard way what is of value, and there are some who never learn. What are the material things that get in the way of knowing Jesus Christ?

Blessings,

Pastor Gool