

an essay:

NEITHER MATERIALISM NOR ASCETICISM

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I. A QUESTION

Why should Christians avoid the extremes of both Materialism and Asceticism? Is it a sin to fall into the extremes of one or the other? And what then is the proper and pious course for the faithful Christian? Is it not the balance of The Middle Way?

II. AGAINST MATERIALISM

Materialism is the vain belief that, if we obtain enough worldly riches – money, possessions, position, power – we will be fulfilled. It is The Great Lie of the so-called “American Dream” that all we need to be satisfied is a pretty house in the suburbs with a picket fence, 2 fancy cars in the driveway, a physically attractive and sexually alluring spouse and a few kids playing on the living room floor in front of the television!

But this is the height of stupidity and foolishness. Physical riches of the world can never fulfill men because our souls are not physical. They can only meet our basic physical needs, but can not of themselves ever bring us lasting happiness. Why not? Because GOD has made us both body and soul, and only His Spirit can fill our souls.

PSALM 33:17-19 warns us, “An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. Behold, the eye of The LORD is upon them that fear Him, upon them that hope in His Mercy; To deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine!” And GOD is The Giver of all good things, both physical and spiritual. How absurd to seek to have only our physical needs met, and think this is all that we need in life, while denying from His hand those things which we need for our spirits!

But that is the insane lie of materialism. And the more you obtain, the more you think you need, never being fulfilled. It makes us cold towards others. It makes us detached from the suffering of our fellow man. It sets up false parameters of who should be respected. And when we don’t obtain money and material things in abundance according to those false standards, it makes us question. It causes us to ask, “Am I of no value because I do not have these things? Does this mean I am a sinner because I am not rich? Is GOD angry at me and punishing me?” It leads to a hopeless despondency that leads in the end only to dark coldness, despair and destruction.

JESUS teaches us in MATTHEW 6:19-21, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also!”

If we insist that our only treasures are material things, making idols out of them and refusing to give thanks to GOD The Divine Giver of all good things – both physical and spiritual – truly our earthly things will neither save us nor fulfill us. They only enslave us! But if we seek the things of GOD’s Kingdom first, He will both meet our physical needs and also feed our souls with His Presence as our Eternal Good Shepherd!

III. AGAINST ASCETICISM

On the other hand, asceticism is the complete rejection of all things physical as evil, retreating into individualistic, self-centered mysticism. But here we forget that, going to the opposite extreme, GOD has created the physical world for our rightful enjoyment. He further blesses us with money, possessions and worldly resources so that we may use them for His Kingdom and as blessings in the lives of others!

Our living Faith is suppose to bring forth Good Works. We bring forth those Christian works of mercy by using the resources that The LORD places in our lives. We are to be faithful stewards, not only of the spiritual gifts of GOD, but also of the physical gifts of GOD. Does GOD bless us with being well off materially? Don't throw it all away to go live in a tower as a religious hermit! Take some of those blessings and go, feed the hungry! Look for opportunities to bless the needy that you see all around you! Give your tithes to The Church for the work of The Kingdom and your offerings for widows and orphans!

Saint James says it so well in JAMES 2:14-17, "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath Faith, and have not Works? can Faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so Faith, if it hath not Works, is dead, being alone!"

The Christian Faith devoid of Good Works is dead. Likewise, as it has been said so well, Christian Love without giving is empty! The Fruit of The Spirit calls for the employment of material possessions, resources and finances to do Good, to carry out The Good Works that Saint Paul speaks of in EPHESIANS 2:10, "For we are His workmanship, created in CHRIST JESUS unto good works, which GOD hath before ordained that we should walk in them!"

Asceticism strips us of the resources we would otherwise have to see CHRIST in others in need. It isolates us from the works of mercy that GOD has ordained us to do in His Name. It set ourselves up haughtily with secret knowledge and pretended piety. It too makes us cold. It denies us and those around us the many earthly blessings that GOD would pour out upon us. It limits The Church on earth. And it makes a stumblingblock for the unsaved, who look at Christians as then uncaring, detached and self-centered fools.

IV. IN CONCLUSION - THE BALANCE OF THE MIDDLE WAY

The point here is that the reasonable and faithful Christian life is to be lived in The Middle Way of balance between the extremes of materialism versus asceticism. We are not to bow down and make material things of this passing physical world our idolatrous false gods. They can not fill us. They will only enslave us, if we make them our objects of desire for their own sake!

But neither are we to throw aside the material blessings which The Almighty places in our hands, to go running off to live isolated from the needs of our fellow man, bobbing our heads up and down in the middle of some harsh and lonely desert! GOD forbid!

The proper pious course for the faithful Christian is the balance of The Middle way, avoiding the sins of both. We are to live by The Spirit in this world, putting to good use as faithful stewards the money and possessions given to us for a time, serving GOD by serving others in Word and in deed. For neither materialism nor asceticism can be our gods, but only our Lord JESUS CHRIST!