

A Bad Case of the Isms

Week 1

We live in a world that is very conscience of health and illness. In almost every newspaper and magazine, there are numerous articles about fitness, medicine, and diseases. Think about all of the “itis-es” and “isms” we take medicine to treat or try to avoid. We pay very close attention to our physical health. It might even be fair to say that we, as a nation, are obsessed with our health. Medical science continues to progress. Medicine and supplements are more accessible now than ever before, and we strive to make everything as safe as possible.

Yet, how often do we pay attention to the health of what we believe and think?

We are in a series called “A Bad Case of the Isms” where we’ll be investigating different beliefs and thought systems in an attempt to take a look at some that are common in our lives.

This area of our lives might seem unimportant. We like to focus on things that are tangible and physical. When we think about changing our lives, we often concentrate on our actions or our bodies. There is nothing wrong this, but our actions and our bodies are only parts of our lives, not the whole. Our thoughts and beliefs play a key role in our lives.

While our thoughts and beliefs might not seem as important as the rest of our lives, the simple truth is this: what we believe effects what we do and who we are. Your actions and my actions are a direct result of our beliefs.

We are going to spend several weeks taking a deeper look at some very common beliefs that permeate our culture and our lives.

One of the hard things about looking at “isms” is that these are often beliefs that have gone unnamed and sometimes unnoticed in our lives for a long time. Things that go unnamed and unnoticed often become ingrained or unquestioned. This is true for an individual as well as for a church. This is especially true for the first “ism” we’ll be looking at this week: legalism.

Legalism is a word you might be familiar with, but how often do we stop to think what it really means? Legalism is when following rules, regulations, and laws become the highest form of righteousness. The focus is on the rules and not on the person the rules were made for. We sometimes refer to legalism as following the letter of the law and not the spirit of it.

It’s not that we don’t understand what legalism is; it’s just that legalism has a way of weaseling into our lives. The same was true back during the times of Jesus.

If you look at who Jesus reserves his harshest criticism for, it is often legalistic religious folks.

For us living a couple thousand years after the time of Jesus, we often lack a full understanding of the sort of legalism Jesus addressed during his life.

Jesus was Jewish. Within the Jewish faith during the time of Jesus there were several different sects, each with a different understanding or “take” on Judaism. One of these sects was the Pharisees. Pharisees were not only the rule keepers of the Jewish faith, but they also defined the boundaries around the law. The Pharisees created literally hundreds of regulations all intended to keep people from even coming close to breaking a law. They also determined who was following the laws correctly and who weren’t.

A contemporary historian to these Pharisees, Josephus, once wrote about them:

The Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees (another sect of Judaism) reject them, and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers. And concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them . . .

Notice several things about the Pharisees that are characteristic of legalism, especially when legalism is in a religious realm. The Pharisees follow not only laws that are found in the Bible (the Law of Moses), but also follow laws passed down from their fathers. They were just as concerned with keeping the traditions alive as they are about following and honoring God. Finally, there were many arguments and divisions among the Pharisees.

These same things sometimes creep into churches today, and each one is absolutely lethal to a Christian community of faith. When a church or person begins to regulate and enforce laws and rules that are not found in the Bible, they are in trouble. When a church or person is more worried about passing down it’s traditions than knowledge and love of God, they are in trouble. And a focus on these minor things almost inevitably leads to divisions and arguments.

Jesus levels his strongest criticism against people with this mindset.

On one occasion (found in **Luke 11:37-44**) Jesus was eating a meal with his friends and a group of Pharisees. Before the meal, it was traditional to ceremonially wash your hands. Jesus did not wash his hands in the manner that the Pharisees expected.

This raised a lot of eyebrows among the Pharisees. You can almost imagine what this group of ultra-religious people must have thought when Jesus, a well-respected teacher, didn't follow one of their most basic rules. I bet there were some snide comments whispered among the Pharisees. Perhaps some dark looks and furrowed eyebrows. After all, they reasoned, Jesus should have known better than to disregard the traditional rules.

Whatever the case, Jesus noticed their reaction right away and addressed it.

Jesus begins to teach them about the things that matter most to God. Jesus told the Pharisees that they worry so much about the rules and regulations, about being externally clean, that they had forgotten that it is more important to be internally clean. They are legalists at heart and the Pharisees knew the laws and how to keep them. But what they missed (or forgotten) was that the external keeping of the laws was never the intent of the laws in the first place.

What God really desires is for them to not only follow the laws, but to follow the justice and love of God.

Legalism draws our attention to the outside and external things. It keeps our thoughts superficial. Jesus wants to draw our attention to something deeper.

For some of us the rules of etiquette the Pharisees were trying to maintain might seem silly. Their insistence that everyone conform to and do things the way they do would grate on my nerves. But the truth is that I'm sometimes the same way. Sometimes I focus on the outside niceties while ignoring or downplaying the internal things.

It's worth making one thing clear; there are laws and regulations that we need to follow. There are absolutely things that we need to pay attention to with regard to what we do and there are things that God has told us to avoid. In **2 Corinthians 3: 7-10** the laws of Moses was a form of glory given by God. Moses enjoyed a closeness with God no one else did during his days. When he walked out of the presence of God with the law etched on stone, the people couldn't even look at him because of the reflected glory of God still shining on his face.

Yet, the laws that God gave to Moses brought condemnation. No one could keep the laws perfectly, yet no one could claim they didn't know the standard that God required.

With Jesus there is a new law. With Jesus there is a new covenant, a new relationship between God and man. If the Law of Moses, the law that brought about condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new law of Jesus which gives life and righteousness.

The message that Jesus gave over and over again was that the laws of Moses were not enough. Humanity cannot (and never could) be saved through the laws of Moses or through any legalistic means.

The old glory. It's not how we normally think of the laws of the Old Testament. Nor do we normally think of Jesus' sacrifice as a new glory. But the Bible teaches us that the glory of God was made clear to us through Jesus.

It's a new way of thinking for us, but it was even more groundbreaking for people of the early church, many of who were coming from a Jewish background. In **Colossians 2: 11-23** we see some of the instructions given to a young church with regard to legalism.

Paul, the author of this letter, has some specific things to say about legalism. He focuses on several areas that were used to identify or set apart the Jewish people: circumcision and the Sabbath. Every Jewish person would have been circumcised and would observe the Sabbath, a day of rest set aside to honor God. Paul writes that the physical act of circumcision is nothing compared to the act of spiritually being circumcised, of putting off our "flesh." Flesh here means the parts of us that belong to this world, the parts that don't belong to God. Flesh is sometimes translated into English as sinful nature, and this is not a bad way of thinking about the natural parts of us that long for the things of this world.

Paul says that with Jesus and with the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead, we are now freed from the authorities and powers that can capture us, including legalism.

He continues by telling these new followers of Jesus that they shouldn't let anyone hold them captive or judge them because of the old ways of things. Don't let anyone judge you because of what you eat or drink. Don't let anyone judge you by what traditions you celebrate or don't celebrate. You are no longer bound by what other people think, Paul says, only by what God thinks.

Legalism cares deeply what people are allowed to eat and drink. Paul writes that no more should we be bound by what others think, only by what God thinks. God set us free from these superficial restrictions. The restrictions of God are summed up in loving God and loving other people.

Against these, legalism has no power.

So where do you stand? To what degree are you caught in the grip of legalism? It's hard to see legalism in our own lives. But there is one thing that always accompanies legalism, which is easier to see: being judgmental.

Paul warns against this sort of judgmental nature. The laws and the celebrations have some value and some worth, but they are only a shadow of the real thing.

They aren't the objects of our worship, only God is. When we judge others because of these shadows, we are missing the whole point and we might be slipping into legalism.

**A Bad Case of the Isms
Small Group Guide
Week 1**

1. How many "isms" can you list?
2. What is the first thing you think of when you hear the word legalism?
3. Why is it that legalism is almost always referred to with regard to "religious people?"
4. What has been your experience with legalistic people?

Read: Colossians 2:11-23

5. Paul in Colossians warns against focusing only on the external and ignoring the internal. What are ways that people can focus on the external and ignore the internal? How have you done this?
6. Have you ever felt like someone was trying to judge you because of something superficial in the setting of church? Describe this experience.
7. How is legalism and being judgmental related? How judgmental do you think you are? To what degree are you legalistic?

**A Bad Case of the Isms
Week 2**

We are in the second week of "A Bad Case of the Isms" where we are looking at some of schools of thought, some "isms," that have a profound effect on our lives. Last week we looked at legalism and how when we allow legalism to penetrate our lives it can have a powerful effect on how we treat other people.

This week we'll be looking at another "ism" that can very quietly have deep consequences on our worldview and our lives. This week we are going to spend some time looking at relativism.

You may have heard of the word relativism before, but it's important that we take a moment to define this term. Generally speaking, relativism is the concept that beliefs are not concrete but depend on the relative context surrounding them. Yet, even this definition is a bit too limiting, since relativism is a very broad topic.

One of the first things we need to understand is relativism can mean a lot of different things. It's easy to see relativism if I ask a question: is a hundred feet far? Well, if you mean is a hundred feet far to run, the answer is no. If you mean is a hundred feet far to fall out of building, than the answer is yes. The answer to the question is relative to the context. This is the basic way of understanding the meaning of relativism.

Relativism is, in general, normally thought of as either the height of evil and compromise or a true sign of progress and intelligence. Yet, relativism is not so easily pigeonholed. It's worth spending some time to dissect this complex topic.

Within our context, there is a fairly straightforward form of relativism that states that "whatever you want to believe is fine, everything is relative." It is from these sorts of arguments that some people come to the conclusion that "all religions are the same," or "all religions teach the same things." This sort of relativism is clearly in sharp contrast with the teaching of the Bible and to be completely honest, is fairly naïve.

It takes only a cursory understanding of the diverse religions of the world to know that all religions are not the same and that the teachings of these religions are contradictory. Yet, this broad statement of relativism leads to the much more accepted version which states, "all religions hold a piece of truth," and then attempt to combine these "truths" into a single belief system. This, undoubtedly, is an attempt to be sensitive and non-judgmental, but in the end it is self-contradictory.

What is ironic about this sort of relativism is the hypocritical stance of the person making these broad faith claims. The statement that "all religions have a piece of truth" assumes that the speaker can take on a god's-eye-view of the world and that they have the ability to identify and pull out the nugget of truth from each belief system.

The motivations of this statement might be completely innocent, but the result smacks of narcissism. What begins with relativism, that everything depends on the context, turns into a statement where the context is ignored because of the ability of a person to see what is true.

There are other forms of relativism that are much more benign. Some people treat relativism as if it were the deepest evil in the world, but the truth is that there are many instances of relativism in the Bible. It might make some people uncomfortable to hear, but one of the criticisms level at Jesus was that he was far to relativistic.

Jesus had many discussions concerning the Sabbath with the Pharisees, a sect within Judaism. One of these discussions centered around the actions of his disciples when they picked the heads off of grain to eat while traveling the countryside, a common practice during the days of Jesus. The Pharisees, who were concerned with the keeping of every letter of the law, were offended that Jesus' disciples would pick grain to eat on the Sabbath, a day when all work is forbidden.

Jesus' reply, found in **Mark 2:23-27**, is that the Sabbath was created for man and not man for the Sabbath. Jesus is saying here that the Sabbath is relative to human need. This relativism insulted the Pharisees, who spent much of their time debating what was considered work on the Sabbath.

Yet, Jesus wanted them to understand that the Sabbath was not to be interpreted in the same way in every context, but that the context determined its usefulness. Jesus' goal was not to undermine the value of honoring God by observing the Sabbath, but he was elevating the worth of people, for whom the Sabbath was created. This is merely to illustrate that relativism is not such an easy topic to discuss, as some might be tempted to assume.

Another clear example of relativism in the Bible is much more relevant to us today. In **1 Corinthians**, Paul writes a letter to a young church that was trying to figure out what was right and wrong. The church at Corinth was constantly faced with questions of how it should interact with the numerous pagan religions that surrounded them. Many of the people who were now following Jesus came out of this pagan background, complicating the issue further.

Now that they are trying to be obedient to Jesus, what practices are acceptable and which are now banned. Was it okay to share a meal with someone who was a pagan? Sometimes during those meals meat would be served that was from an animal killed to honor a pagan god. Would sharing a meal with a pagan in this context be the same as worshipping a pagan idol?

Paul writes to clarify this and in **1 Corinthians 10:25-29** we see something amazing, because it is a clear case of relativism. Paul tells this young church that if someone invites them to dinner, they should accept if they want to. And if during that meal meat is served, they should feel free to eat whatever is served without raising an issue of your conscience. What Paul is saying is that there is great freedom within the realm of eating meat. But then things get a little harder.

Paul continues by saying that if there is another person there who might be offended because you are eating meat sacrificed to idols, then you should avoid eating it. So, while we have great freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols, that freedom is relative to other people. Paul says that we should never use our freedom in such a way that it will cause someone else to sin or struggle. Whether the act is acceptable or not is completely relative to how it affects others. There is great freedom, but when this freedom causes someone else to struggle or sin, then that freedom becomes sin for us.

There are things that are clear in the Bible. There are things that are clearly sins and should be avoided. There is never a time when it is okay to be sexually impure. There is never a time that it is okay to commit murder. There is never a time when it is acceptable to blaspheme God and take him lightly. But there are other instances when the Bible is silent. What happens then?

I think this raises a question: how do we know when we have freedom within relativism, and how do we know when things are cut and dry between right and wrong. The clearest way to address this question is not to simply offer a list of the “do’s and don’ts” of Christianity, but to offer more general guidelines.

Jesus was once asked (**Mark 12:28-31**) what was the greatest commandment that we should follow. This is a big question, and whenever someone asks Jesus a big question we should be careful to note the answer.

Jesus says that there are two commands at the top of the list. First, everyone should love God with all of the heart, mind, and strength. The second is that we should love other people the way we want to be loved ourselves. This might seem to have very little to do with relativism, but it’s these two commands that form the foundation of how we answer relativism in our lives.

The truth is that there are hundreds of choices that the Bible doesn’t address directly. Does God care about what kind of shirt I wear today? Does God care what I have for lunch? Does God care if I buy a new TV?

The answer is maybe. Maybe not.

What we can know for sure is that anything that fractures your relationship with God is a sin. And anything that fractures your relationship with other people is a sin. And anything that causes a fracture between someone else and their relationship with God is a sin.

This is the framework from which we are able to determine whether something is a sin or not. When we are faced with a relative decision, something that is not clearly defined in the Bible, these questions will help guide us.

Does God care what shirt I wear today? Well, is the shirt intentionally provocative in such a way that I know it will have an effect on my neighbor? Then God does care, and I shouldn't wear that shirt to avoid making my neighbor stumble.

Does God care about what I eat for lunch today? Well, does my choice in meals regularly show I have little or no regard for my body and that it was created, not for my own pleasure, but for God's? Then God does care because my choice might interfere with my relationship with him.

Does God care if I buy a new TV? Well, is this TV just another step in a pattern of purchasing that shows I have more concern with my own material possessions than I have for those around me that are in need? Then God does care about what I spend my money on because my money has become a barrier between those in need and me.

We have great freedom. God has given us amazing freedom. It is actually astounding to think of the level of freedom we've been granted by God. But that freedom must never be used in such a way that it will damage my relationship with God, my relationship with other people, or other people's relationship with God. In each of these cases, my freedom becomes a sin because of the relative nature of how it affects others and myself. This is the form of relativism we must be on the lookout for.

A Bad Case of the Isms Week 2 Small Group Guide

1. List some questions that are relative, where the answer might change depending on the context (i.e. is the weather nice?, are you warm?, etc.).
2. How can the context of a situation change how you view it? Describe a time when your reaction to someone changed relative to the context in which you experienced it? (i.e. you were in a bad mood, external factor like the weather or time was different, etc).
3. What is your first reaction to the word relativism? To you does it normally have a positive, negative, or neutral connotation? Why?

4. During this week's reading we look at how there is relativism in the Bible. What is your reaction to this idea?
5. When you think of what God wants from us, do you normally think that we have great freedom, or that we are limited? Why?
6. The freedom we have in God is limited by how it affected our relationship with God and our relationship with other people, as well as other people's relationship with God. How often do you think about these considerations before you make a choice? What are ways in which you can be sure your freedom doesn't negatively affect you or others in light of these questions?

A Bad Case of the Isms Week 3

If you were to open many dictionary, you would find many words whose definition you wouldn't know. Most of the time the reason we don't know what these words mean is because we use the infrequently, if ever. It also doesn't really matter if we know these words, unless, of course, we're studying for the SATs.

There are undoubtedly some words that end with "isms" on the list of words we don't normally use, but some of these are less benign. Some of these might actually make a big difference in our lives, whether we know it or not.

We are in the third week of our series "A Bad Case of the Isms" where we've been looking at some schools of thought and worldviews that can have a deep effect on our lives. Unlike some of the other words in the dictionary, these "isms" might actually be worth learning.

I think our “ism” for today is one we tend to be less familiar with. This week we’re going to be looking at Gnosticism. The word Gnosticism, which looks pretty strange, actually comes from Greek, the language the New Testament portion of the Bible was originally written in. It’s based off of the word *gnosis*, which means knowledge.

Gnosticism is a system of beliefs that showed up and started taking root just after the time of Jesus. The truth is that Gnosticism is a pretty big category of thoughts and beliefs, but there are several features that are consistent across the board. As the name implies, Gnosticism is highly concerned with knowledge. Yet, we don’t mean knowledge as we normally think about it. Gnosticism is concerned with secret knowledge, knowledge that the general population wouldn’t have access to, but which only a select few have. It’s not intellectual knowledge that is sought after by a Gnostic, but mystical knowledge. The knowledge that Gnosticism seeks is not rational and factual, but is more experiential and relational. Gnostics believe that they have knowledge about god, the universe, and humanity that other don’t.

So what’s the purpose of this secret knowledge? Why devote a life to seeking out and finding secret knowledge? What’s the point? Well, it comes down to the worldview of Gnosticism.

Gnosticism believes that all physical matter is evil. Everything that is tangible, anything you can touch with your hands and see with your eyes, is evil. This includes the earth and everything on it. Since this also includes people, which we can also see, hear, and touch, they too are evil. At least the physical part of humans is. Which brings us to another characteristic of Gnosticism; the body is a prison for the soul. The body is physical and so just like everything else on earth, is evil. The soul, which is not tangible, is good but must someone escape the evil body.

Now, this isn’t saying that Gnostics believe the body houses the soul or that the body is where the soul is located. Gnosticism says that the body is an evil jailer of the soul. According to Gnosticism, we need to be freed from this body and the physical world. That is the point of the secret knowledge, to find the hidden thing that will allow us to shatter the evil chains our body has over our souls and to escape.

This idea that all matter is evil actually leads to a theory that all matter wasn’t created by a good god, but by a nasty, evil being.

This gave rise to an odd theology that there are dozens and dozens of intermediates between the good god and the evil god of creation. Since a good god could not possibly touch, much less create, evil matter, there had to be something else or someone else at work. These dozens of divisions between the

good god and the evil creator are what Gnostics called Archons, which serve like angels and demons in our understanding.

These are the main features of Gnosticism: the world and all matter are evil, our good souls are trapped by our evil bodies, and if we find the right secret, mystical knowledge we could be set free from our evil bodied and this evil world.

It is within this context that Paul, an author of much of the New Testament portion of the Bible, writes to some young churches struggling to understand what is true and what is false. Gnosticism was just beginning to find a foothold in the world during the writing of these letters and Paul wants to be sure that no one is confused about the right way to go.

In the book of Colossians, Paul addresses Gnosticism head on.

In **Colossians 1**, Paul spends a considerable amount of time stressing two major points to refute Gnosticism. First, Paul wants to be sure that no one questions Jesus' relationship with God. Gnostics believe that since all matter was evil, including our bodies, than God could never dwell in a person. They believed the same went for Jesus. Jesus, Gnostics believed, could not be fully God and fully human. Paul wants to nip this in the bud. Paul stresses over and over again that Jesus was fully God. God was pleased to have his fullness live inside of Jesus.

A second point Paul makes in Colossians 1 is that Jesus is not only fully God, he is also responsible for all of creation. There is not a division between a good god and an evil god of creation, there is only one God, revealed to us in Jesus. And it was Jesus who created everything. Jesus created the things we can see and hear and touch and taste. He created the physical world and that creation is good, not evil. Jesus also created the spiritual world, the things that are invisible and unseen. Jesus created everything and this creation is a good thing.

Paul also teaches that there is not a long line of intermediaries between God and man; there is no chain of gods and god-like Archons stretching from a good god to us, but there is only the one true God revealed to us in Jesus.

Later in the book of Colossians, Paul wants to make very clear where Gnosticism needs to put its focus. In **Colossians 2** Paul writes that the full mystery of God was hidden in Jesus and that all wisdom and all knowledge can be found in Jesus. Think about how clearly this is a statement aimed at someone who was Gnostic. What are Gnostics always searching for? They are searching for secret wisdom and knowledge. Where does Paul say they can find this wisdom and knowledge? They can find it in Jesus. Paul is saying that Gnostics can spend their entire lives searching for wisdom and secret knowledge in an attempt to escape this evil world, but if they really want to encounter God, wisdom, and knowledge, they need to look for it in Jesus.

All knowledge (again, written here as the word *gnosis*) is hidden in Jesus, so if you desire knowledge, it is in Jesus you must search. Paul is saying to take all of our effort and all of our curiosity, and all of our passion and put it into searching for and drawing closer to Jesus.

You might be wondering, “What does this have to do with me?” After all, you might not have even heard of Gnosticism before, much less believe everything that Gnosticism teaches. Yet, as often happens with “isms,” they have a way of influencing our lives in subtle ways, whether we know what the “ism” means or not.

I think there are three main ways in which we connect with the ideas and philosophy of Gnosticism.

First, we are tempted to turn to a generic spirituality instead of Jesus. Think about Gnosticism and the search for knowledge and wisdom. Since the knowledge was mystical in nature, Gnostics didn't really care where it came from, so they would pull from other religions and schools of thought in an attempt to find “wisdom.” This is not the way we are called to follow Jesus. Jesus doesn't desire for us to be spiritual. Jesus doesn't long for us to seek out a generic spiritual experience or to find some mystical knowledge. Jesus longs for us to seek after and follow him.

Second, I think people in our culture often live with the mentality of trying to find the next big thing that will fulfill them. We search for the secret to success, the secret to making money, the secret to being happy and fulfilled. We spend our time and our money looking for the secret knowledge that will set us free. We were hard wired by God to search for him, but when we look in the wrong places we will never be fulfilled with lesser things.

We were created to seek after and find God, and nothing else will fill that void in our lives. Think about the ways that people try to find a piece of happiness and fulfillment in their lives away from Jesus. People try to find it in their relationships, in their families, in their work, and in their possessions. Yet, none of these things, as good as they can be, are big enough to fill the God-sized void in our lives.

In the end, it is only Jesus that will set us free and it is only Jesus that will fill the longing we have in our lives.

Finally, Gnosticism taught that it was only through the work and effort of the searcher that they would be set free. This is a very dangerous and pervasive thought that our culture has completely bought into. We often live with the idea that if we were just a little better, if we were just a little stronger, if we worked just a little harder, then maybe we might be saved and freed from the burdens around us.

This is the classic American story, when someone works really hard and finds their way from rags to riches. And while this might make for a really inspiring story, it makes for a pretty poor theology. The Bible teaches clearly that we cannot be strong enough, smart enough, or work hard enough to set ourselves free. We can't earn our own salvation, no matter how powerful we are. And the attitude that if we could just work a little harder to be free ourselves is a very dangerous one, because it doesn't acknowledge that it is only through Jesus that we are saved.

Gnosticism might be a strange word, but it really is a system of beliefs we sometimes follow even if we don't know it. There is a whole lot more at stake than the SATs.

A Bad Case of the Isms Small Group Guide

1. Gnosticism is a strange word. What are some other "isms" that are strange or uncommon?
2. Gnosticism holds that all physical matter, including our bodies is evil, that our bodies are an evil jail for our souls, and that we need secret knowledge to allow our souls to escape. What is your reaction to these beliefs? How do you see these in our world today?

Read Colossians 1:15-19 and Colossians 2:2-9

3. How are these passages directly addressing Gnosticism in the church?
4. What is a way that you desire a generic spirituality instead of a obedient faith in Jesus?
5. What can you do this week to rely more on God and less on your own power to save yourself?
6. When have there been times that you sought after something to fulfill you besides Jesus?

A Bad Case of the Isms

Week 4

We are in the last week of our series “A Bad Case of the Isms” where we’ve been investigating different schools of thought and worldviews. It’s easy to think about worldviews as something that someone else might need to investigate, but the truth is if you’re breathing, you have a worldview. Everyone has a perspective from which they look at and think about the world. Our worldviews effect how we make decisions, how we react to different situations, and the framework from which we see others and ourselves. Yet, as important as worldviews are, they go largely unnoticed in our own lives. It’s easy to see the worldviews of others, but very hard to see our own worldview.

That is why it is so important that we take time and effort learning about different worldviews we might have bought into without ever realizing it.

Of all the worldviews we are susceptible to, I think the one we are discussing this week might be the most prevalent. Part of the reason this is the case is because our culture has not only made this “ism” acceptable, it has glorified and glamorized it to the point that it goes unquestioned in most peoples lives.

This week we are looking at the “ism” of materialism.

Materialism in the United States is a way of life. We see it on TV everyday. From sitcoms, to commercials, to reality TV, we are encouraged to be materialistic. So what does it mean to be materialistic? What it really comes down to is when the pursuit of money or possessions is one of the highest goals of our lives. Materialism comes in many different forms, but in all cases the objective of the person’s life is to acquire more, to get more, to have more.

I think there is a risk whenever someone in a church context talks about money that people stop listening. The church, in general, has sometimes done a poor job at talking about money in a healthy way. The impressions people have sometimes is that the church is more interested in your money than in you. Here at CCC, we want to be the sort of place where we show in very tangible ways that we care much more about you and your life than your money. But it would be silly of us to never talk about money when it is such a central part of our lives.

Just try to turn on the news or catch up on current events without coming across headline after headline about money, finances, and the economy. It is a huge part of all of our lives. While we sometimes want to compartmentalize our lives into our church life, work life, family life, and financial life, God has no such desire

and makes no such distinction. God is interested in our whole lives, including our money.

In fact, the Bible has a lot to say about materialism.

One of the very first things we have to understand about materialism is that it's really not about money. Money is involved, but money is almost like an innocent bystander. Materialism is, at its core, an issue of the heart. Materialism is when our hearts long for money and possessions. Here's the deal, our hearts weren't made to long for and seek after money.

One time while Jesus was teaching his followers he told them, ". . . **where your treasure is, there your heart will be also**" (**Matthew 6:21**). What this really means is that the things that you long for and the things that you value most, your heart will live there. Jesus wanted his followers to understand the link between our heart and our stuff, because Jesus knew that the things we treasure are often our possessions.

Again, we see that money is really not the "bad guy" here. Money is a tool, and it can be used very well or very poorly. I don't think anyone purposefully says, "I really want to spend my life chasing after superficial things, seeking money, and buying the most stuff." But people do spend their lives doing just that. I think what happens is we get distracted and we forget that money was only ever meant to be a tool. Instead, it takes on a position of prominence, a position it was never meant to have.

So what happens when we allow our hearts to love money? The Bible teaches on this very clearly in a letter Paul, the author of much of the New Testament portion of the Bible, writes to his protégé Timothy.

In the Bible we read (**1 Timothy 6:9-10**) that **the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils**. When you think about the different sorts of evils there are in the world, many of them have their root in the love of money, in materialism. I would think for most of us, the love of money isn't leading us to commit horrific, evil acts. But most of us can identify, to some degree, the second part of this sentence. The love of money has caused many people to "**wander from the faith and pierce themselves with many griefs.**"

Think about the sort of grief we suffer because of materialism, because of the love of money. Think about the worry and anxiety we feel when we overextend ourselves financially. Think about the jealousy that is brought about when someone has what we want. Think about the anger and bitterness that results when we feel like we've been shortchanged with regard to money.

The love of money, materialism, causes us to pierce ourselves with all kinds of grief.

One of the main areas of our lives that I think materialism deeply affects is our relationships with other people.

Materialism causes us to see people differently. We look at people as either someone who can help me or someone who has nothing to offer me. What it does is it changes people from being a creation of God that deserves love into a means to an end. Materialism leads us to determine other people's worth by what they can do for me. This leads to us treating people with favoritism.

This was something the early church had to deal with as well. The dynamic of the early church was very diverse. At any gathering there may have been people who had absolutely no money, and there might also been people who would have been something like minor royalty. You had poor people and slaves rubbing elbows with the rich and elite of society. And favoritism crept in. James, an early leader of the church, writes about just such a situation. In the Bible we read (**James 2: 1-4**) instructions to the church to avoid favoritism.

In this passage, two people are compared to each other. One guy is rich and obviously so. He's wearing a rolodex watch, Gucci shoes, and an Armani suit. He has an air of authority and power. The other guy is poor and also obviously so. His clothing is threadbare and his hair is unkempt. He keeps his eyes lowered and tries not to draw attention to himself. They both come through the door. How do we react to them?

What materialism does is it tends to draw our focus to the one who looks wealthy. We save them the best seats. We pay them special attention. We give them positions of honor. What about the other person, you ask? Well, they're welcome to be there, I guess. But they get the standing room only and no special treatment. Why? Because the wealthy man might offer me some sort of benefit. The other guy, he has nothing for me.

James writes that this should not be so. This sort of favoritism places us as judges of who is worthy and who is not worthy, a position we were not intended to have.

Materialism leads us to treat people with favoritism.

Another way materialism affects our relationships is when it causes us to compare. When my desire and goal is to acquire money and possessions, I start to notice what kind of money and possessions other people have. My eyes start to wander over to my neighbor's house. My mind starts to think about my coworker's paycheck. And then when I look back at my own stuff, stuff that I really enjoyed before I started looking around, it seems to have lost its luster. I could have been perfectly pleased with what I had until I noticed someone else has something better or more.

We compare what we drive to what others drive. We compare where we live to where others live. We compare what we're wearing to what we see other people wearing. Or at least, I do. Maybe you do too.

Comparing is a dangerous thing. In the Bible we read:

We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves.

2 Corinthians 10:12

We do not dare compare ourselves . . . we do not dare. Why? Because once you start down the road of comparing, you are no longer able to see your own blessings. Once we begin to compare ourselves to others we can only see where our own blessings fall short of what someone else has. Materialism pushes us to look around and once we have, to get what others have. Or to get more than others have.

But we are not called to compare ourselves to others. We are called to appreciate the blessings we have been given.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.

James 4: 1-2

What causes fights? When we let our eyes wander and we let our hearts, which is the core of materialism, run wild. And we begin to compare, we begin to covet, we begin to desire what someone else has. And it causes divisions in our relationships.

So what do we do to begin to break ourselves of materialism?

One thing we can do is begin to show gratitude for the blessings we have. People who are able to regularly, genuinely, and deeply show gratitude for the good things in their lives are often people on whom materialism has no power.

Gratitude is a great equalizer for materialism.

A Bad Case of the Isms
Week 4
Small Group Guide

1. In our culture materialism is not only acceptable, it's promoted. In what ways do you see this?
2. What is your general attitude toward money? Do you normally think of money as good, evil, or neutral?
3. How would you define materialism? In what ways is materialism an issue of the heart?

Read: 1 Timothy 6:9-10, James 4: 1-2

4. To what degree do you struggle with materialism?
5. How do you think materialism has affected your relationships?
6. In your life, what is your experience with favoritism and with comparing yourself to others? Do you struggle with either of these and if so, how?
7. In what ways can you create a regular time to show gratitude in your life?