

Defining Hoarding Disorder:

How to counsel someone who excessively accumulates material goods

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Abstract

Title: Defining Hoarding Disorder – How to counsel someone who excessively accumulates material goods

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Hoarding Disorder is a diagnosable mental illness according to the psychiatric medical community. This diagnosis is given to individuals who exhibit subjectively defined behaviors related to collecting and disposing of material goods. These material goods can be items of value and/or items that most people would call trash. This accumulation compromises the original intended use of rooms in the home and can be a serious health threat. The label of “disorder” or “mental illness” would suggest that the root of these behaviors is biological, yet there is no objective test and no known medication that successfully addresses this behavior.

From a biblical perspective, these behaviors can be evidence of an idolatrous heart. Certainly, a variety of possible heart idols can come to mind. Does this person trust in the provision of a good God? Is there fear? Fear of what? Is there pride in a sense of self-sufficiency? What about identity - does the “stuff” represent who the person is? How about comfort? Does the abundance of things create a sense of safety and comfort? These are issues that should be explored, but often the person who struggles, even though a true believer, does not see her behavior as a problem, certainly not sin. Herein lies the first hurdle.

There is not a lot of material on this topic. I know a few people in my church, and one family member, who struggle with these kinds of behaviors. All of them tend to keep it a secret; only a small group actually know why no one is invited to visit them in their homes. For these reasons, I have selected this topic to explore so that I might learn more about what the Bible has to say on this topic, and to equip myself to provide biblical assistance. It is my hope that this paper may also assist others to both recognize the secret held by their brothers and sisters, and be better equipped to encourage them. Even though the person who struggles with this kind of accumulation might not admit that there is a problem; in most cases, there is. They need help to examine their hearts, and for most they will likely find idols there that need to be purged. Let the work begin.

1) INTRODUCTION¹

Do you know someone who has difficulty getting rid of things? The truth actually is that all of us do on some level. Dr. Ed Welch says that this difficulty is not a yes or no, but rather a more or less.² This paper will specifically focus on the Christian who is on the significantly “more” side of this spectrum. While the term “hoarding” comes from medical secular vocabulary, it is still an appropriate term to use to describe this behavior, so I will use it here; however, I will refrain from using the word “hoarder” to refer to the person, unless the writing is a direct quote. Language is important and I do not wish to imply that this behavior is the person’s identity. It is not. The Christian here is a child of God who struggles with excessive acquiring or storing-up that results in a tremendous amount of clutter in the home.

These Christians accumulate things to such an extent that the home is not functional for the purposes that would be pleasing to God, such as serving others and hospitality. Rooms in the home are compromised so that they can no longer be used for their original intended purpose, but rather act as places to store massive amounts of stuff. They invest a great deal of their time in activities and responsibilities that include acquisition, use, care, storage, and disposal of material goods.³ Stuff takes over their space and their time, because they find it very difficult to part with anything and can’t seem to stop adding things to the hoard. Everything has value. It is a problem that, without intervention, mostly escalates. The time that is required for these acquisition

¹ Information in the “Introduction” section, unless otherwise noted, comes from the experience of the author through interviews and personal relationships with both those who struggle with hoarding and those who desire to help those who struggle.

² Ed Welch, “Hoarding and the DSM5,” *CCEF* (blog), June 3, 2013, <https://www.ccef.org/hoarding-and-dsm-5/>

³ Randy O Frost and Gail Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2010), 262.

activities and responsibilities, and the lack of working space because of the clutter, rob this dear one of the very things that were sought by acquiring the items in the first place.⁴

The medical profession has identified Hoarding Disorder (HD) in the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – Fifth Edition (DSM5)⁵ as a new mental illness category that has subjective behaviors listed for diagnostic purposes. In other words, Hoarding Disorder is now considered a diagnosable mental illness, whereas previously the behaviors were included as one of the criteria used for diagnosing Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). It is interesting to note that there is no conclusive or objective clinical test to diagnose this disorder as a physical or mental (brain) illness.

While the diagnostic criteria listed in the DSM5 can help us to understand the struggles of someone seemingly enslaved to these behaviors, the biblical counselor will be concerned with how matters of the heart are impacting behavior. It will be one purpose of this paper to explore some of the more common idols that may be hindering true worship for the person who hoards. Does this person trust in the provision of a good God? What about identity - does the “stuff” represent who the person is? How about comfort? Does the abundance of things create a sense of safety and comfort? Is there perhaps pride involved that makes one think that she can take care of anything, both for herself and others, if she just has enough stuff on hand? Is it fear? Fear of what?

This topic is relevant to the church today because hoarding is often a hidden pattern of behavior that impacts the life of a believer, and therefore the church. Most people who engage in

⁴ Randy O Frost and Gail Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2010), 262.

⁵ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

this activity will not invite others into their home. This is an indication that they recognize there is something wrong with how they live, yet they will still argue, even with supposed biblical justification, that there is nothing wrong with their actions, certainly nothing sinful. While it is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin, God may choose to use others to help with this process. This paper will hopefully provide understanding and some biblical tools for those who wish to help with this conviction process. It will also provide biblical principles and tools for the person who struggles with hoarding and desires to change, as well as the counselor working with such a person.

In an effort to support an understanding of Hoarding Disorder and provide biblical principles and tools to help both counselor and counselee address heart issues, the following outline will be followed. First, a review of the secular material that has to do with identifying and treating Hoarding Disorder will be presented. This includes looking at the criteria of the DSM5, identifying related illnesses, and sharing information about how people with this diagnosis are helped by the medical profession. Next, a biblical perspective and possible heart idols will be discussed. What is this person valuing more than God? Is there too much focus on the things of this earth? How is this person reflecting the image of God? After all, our God is a God of order and good design, not a God of chaos and disorder. Finally a biblical counseling model for helping someone practicing sin associated with these behaviors will be provided.

Research methodology will include a review of current material available on the subject, both secular and biblical; examining possible idolatries that could be likely contributors to the problem; and a review of biblical help that is available to deal with those specific idolatries. There are a variety of types of hoarding. This focus of this paper is the Christian whose behaviors are motivated by fear and a lack of trust in the provision of God.

2) SECULAR DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

a) Secular Definition

- i) “Compulsive hoarding (disposophobia) is the act of accumulating excessive amounts of both valuable and worthless items with an inability to use or discard any of them, regardless of space limitations, hazardous or unsanitary conditions and financial gain from a sale or trade of the items.”⁶ “Approximately 5% of the population shows evidence of clinical hoarding and this rate is twice the rate of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and four times the rate of bipolar or schizophrenia disorders.”⁷
- ii) “People who hoard may have... a family history of hoarding and perfectionism. They may experience difficulties with decision making, form intense emotional attachments to a wide variety of objects, ... and hold tightly to the belief of not wasting anything because of potential monetary and/or emotional value.”⁸
- iii) The increase of this disorder in western societies is seen as due to the abundance of inexpensive and easily accessible objects, and also because of the materialistic and commercial nature of our society.⁹
- iv) Hoarding Disorder was recently separated in the DSM from OCD. It used to be one of the behaviors to diagnose OCD. One of the differences is that the person with OCD

⁶ Timothy Clinton, “Chapter 24 – Hoarding,” in *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 206.

⁷ Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation, www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding, in Timothy E. Clinton, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 207.

⁸ Timothy Clinton, “Chapter 24 – Hoarding,” in *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 208.

⁹ Randy Frost and Gail Steketee, *Stuff : Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2010), 262.

engages in obsessions that are intrusive or unwanted, whereas the person with HD does what they do because of the pleasure it brings them.¹⁰

b) Secular Diagnosis

i) Hoarding Disorder is listed as a separate category in the most recent (2013) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fifth Edition (DSM5).¹¹ It was in this edition that Hoarding Disorder was first separated from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). In previous editions hoarding behaviors were listed as one of several criteria used to diagnosis OCD. The current behavioral criteria from the DSM5 for diagnosis of Hoarding Disorder are:¹²

- (1) “Persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value.”
- (2) “This difficulty is due to a perceived need to save the items and to the distress associated with discarding them.”
- (3) “The difficulty discarding possessions results in the accumulation of possessions that congest and clutter active living areas and substantially compromises their intended use. If living areas are uncluttered, it is only because of the interventions of third parties.”

¹⁰ Michael First, “Transcript: Changes to Hoarding Disorder and OCD in DSM-5,” Psychiatry & Behavioral Health Learning Network, October 14, 1914, <https://www.psychcongress.com/article/transcript-changes-hoarding-disorder-and-ocd-dsm-5>.

¹¹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 156-159.

¹² *Ibid.*, 156.

- (4) “The hoarding causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (including maintaining an environment safe for oneself or others.)”
- ii)** Two of the four specifications in the DSM5 that may or may not be present are paraphrased here:¹³
- (1) Excessive acquiring – inability to stop themselves from acquiring things, especially if free or a good deal.
- (2) Poor insight – difficulty grasping the severity of their problem. They wonder why others make such a fuss about it.
- iii)** Two of four classic OCD obsessions through which hoarding behaviors can occur are:¹⁴
- (1) “Superstitious thoughts – unreasonable beliefs that throwing something away will result in a catastrophe of some kind.” 2)
- (2) “persistent avoidance of onerous compulsions – not discarding to avoid endless checking before discarding can occur”.
- iv)** “The DSM description helps focus our attention on the experience of the sufferer and shapes the data-gathering questions that can help us determine the extent and severity of the counselee’s struggle,... but does not explain why someone struggles... For that

¹³ David Tolin, Randy Frost, and Gail Steketee, *Buried in Treasures : Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

¹⁴ Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation, www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding, in Timothy E. Clinton, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 207.

we need a biblical view of human nature that provides a foundation for a biblical counseling approach.”¹⁵

- v) Rachel Cooper, a British philosopher specializing in the philosophy of medicine, argues that the separation of hoarding in the DSM5 was not appropriate because this is a behavior that is not internal in nature, but rather is seen in specific circumstances such as cultures of plenty and consumption. She also poses an ethical concern recognizing the difficulty of diagnosing and treating someone who does not want to be diagnosed or treated. She would prefer to label it as a bad habit, rather than as a medical diagnosis.¹⁶

3) SECULAR INTERPRETATION AND TREATMENT

a) Causes

- i) Hoarding Disorder may have some connection to difficulties with executive functioning or the ability to plan and organize tasks.¹⁷
- ii) “Collectively, evidence from neuropsychological testing and neuroimaging research suggests that compulsive hoarding is characterized by abnormal activity in areas of the frontal lobe, such as orbitofrontal cortex, ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and anterior cingulate cortex.”¹⁸ “Most of the dopamine-sensitive neurons are found in

¹⁵ Michael R. Emler, *OCD: Freedom for the Obsessive-Compulsive – Resources for Changing*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishers, 2004).

¹⁶ Rachel Cooper, “Chapter Four – Issues of Content: the Birth of a New Diagnosis – Hoarding Disorder,” in *Diagnosing the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (London: Karnac, 2014), 36-38.

¹⁷ Mike Emler et al., “Hoarding,” *CCEF* (podcast), June 13, 2016, <https://www.ccef.org/podcast/hoarding/>.

this area of the brain, which also handles executive functioning (such as reasoning, logic, rational thinking, and cognitive processing).”¹⁹

- iii) “Usually hoarders struggle with a sense of abandonment, loneliness, isolation, and shame. These emotions are reinforced because of their behavior and because friends and family members find it difficult to cope with their hoarding and disconnect from them.”²⁰
- iv) “It is reasonable to assume that a hoarder probably felt abandonment in childhood or has had a traumatic experience of some kind.”²¹

b) Acknowledgement of the Problem

- i) “When your home is filled to the brim with stuff, it’s hard to get any enjoyment out of your possessions. The good stuff might well be buried underneath a pile of other stuff, so it’s hard to find. Even if you do find the good stuff, you might not have enough room to enjoy it. Or you might find that after being buried under a pile for a long time, the good stuff has deteriorated to the point where it’s not so good anymore. The critical issue, then is to make room in your home for the things you value most.”²²

¹⁸Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation, www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding, in Timothy E. Clinton, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 207.

¹⁹ Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation, www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding, in Timothy E. Clinton, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 207.

²⁰ Timothy Clinton, “Chapter 24 – Hoarding,” in *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 208.

²¹ Ibid., 208.

²² David Tolin, Randy Frost, and Gail Steketee, *Buried in Treasures : Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pg 7.

ii) “For some people, the item represents a potential opportunity they just can’t pass up... Others worry that discarding items would be wasteful... or [the discarding process] is so elaborate, time-consuming, and unpleasant that the home fills up... [then] the person feels overwhelmed and the urge to save outweighs the urge to purge.”²³

c) Treatment

- i) The primary treatment for Hoarding Disorder is cognitive behavioral therapy²⁴; however, this is often not helpful, because the person hoarding does not recognize the negative impact of hoarding on their lives or don’t believe that they need treatment. The thought of changing their behavior actually can cause intense anxiety. It is often because of third party intervention that a person seeks help.^{25 26}
- ii) “While both individual and group therapy are used to treat hoarders, responses to medications normally used for OCD patients have mixed results.”²⁷
- iii) “A new cognitive behavior therapy has been developed using methods that combine elements of motivational interviewing, cognitive therapy, and behavioral practice for

²³ David Tolin, Randy Frost, and Gail Steketee, *Buried in Treasures : Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

²⁴ Batya Swift Yasgur, MA, LSW, “Managing Hoarding Disorder - Psychiatry Advisor,” Psychiatry Advisor, July 27, 2015, <https://www.psychiatryadvisor.com/home/topics/anxiety/obsessive-compulsive-and-related-disorders/managing-hoarding-disorder/>.

²⁵ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 156.

²⁶ Ed Welch, “Hoarding and the DSM5,” CCEF (blog), June 3, 2013, <https://www.ccef.org/hoarding-and-dsm-5/>

²⁷ Timothy Clinton, “Chapter 24 – Hoarding,” in *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 208.

- OCD and skills training. This treatment focuses on excessive acquisition, difficulty discarding possessions, and the disorganization that makes functioning problematic.”²⁸
- iv) “Group therapy has proven effective because of the increased support, motivation, and accountability, often accompanied by reduced shame, guilt, and isolation associated with hoarding.”²⁹
- v) “We do have evidence... that a particular kind of psychological therapy – cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) – is helpful for people with hoarding.”³⁰
- vi) “Due to the complexity of this disorder, professional medical and therapeutic help may be necessary.”³¹
- vii) Recommended action steps:³²
- (1) Admit hoarding has become a problem. Start by admitting that some items are less important than others.
 - (2) Detach from items. Acknowledge that bad things will not happen if an item is discarded.
 - (3) Reduce the urge to buy and collect. Stop adding to the hoard.
 - (4) Join a support group. Knowing that you are not alone is a powerful dynamic.

²⁸ Timothy Clinton, “Chapter 24 – Hoarding,” in *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 208.

²⁹ Ibid., 208.

³⁰ David Tolin, Randy Frost, and Gail Steketee, *Buried in Treasures : Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

³¹ Ibid., 208.

³² Ibid., 209-210.

4) BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

a) Biblical Definition

- i) Variations of the word “hoard” are found only once in the New Testament and once in the Old Testament³³; however, there are biblical synonyms, such as “stores-up or storing-up”³⁴. There are also principles that can be applied to the behavior of storing-up and/or accumulating things to the point of excess. These principles include the 1) the folly of greed³⁵, 2) an untrusting fear regarding lack of provision³⁶, and 3) perhaps just a wrong focus on the things of this earth³⁷.
- ii) The Bible would not define behavior as illness, as does the secular literature, but rather would label behavior that does not adhere to God’s commands as disobedience or sin.
- iii) Commandments that may be violated by someone who excessively stores-up or hoards things to the point that the congestion and clutter found in active living areas of a home causes the area’s intended use to be compromised may include:
 - (1) Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Deut 6:5; Mark 12:30).
Have you elevated accumulation of stuff above God?

³³ Eccl 5:13; Isaiah 23:18.

³⁴ Luke 12:21; James 5:3; Matthew 6:19-20.

³⁵ Luke 12:15; Col 3:5; James 5:1-3; Prov 11:26

³⁶ Matt 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-34

³⁷ Col 3:1-2; Matt 6:19-21

- (2) Love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27). How is your family impacted by your accumulation of stuff? Or your neighbor, if things are accumulated in your yard?
- (3) Be hospitable (Rom 12:13; Heb 13:2). This is related to loving your neighbor. Can you welcome someone into your home to show hospitality or to provide fellowship? Is it a comfortable place to share with others?
- (4) Trust God for your needs (Matt 6:25-34). Or does your hoarding represent a fear that you will not have what you need? Do you trust in God's provision and His providence? Or are you relying on self?
- (5) Be an image bearer (Gen 1:27). God is a God of order, not chaos, and calls us to be orderly as well.³⁸ Who He is should shine through the Christian's life. Excessive accumulation of things, for whatever purpose, does not mirror our God. Are you being a good image bearer of God in your home?
- (6) Be a good testimony to others (2 Cor 1:12). Does how you live reflect who you are – a child of God, as one trusting in the good provision of his Father, striving towards holiness? Do those who see your home think of you as someone who is secure in that knowledge of who you are? Or do they see someone who is fearful and goes to extreme to be self-sufficient.
- (7) Do not be prideful (Prov 11:2). Do you find yourself being prideful because of the things in your home and the possibilities of what you could do with them, if ever

³⁸ Creation is certainly an account describing our God as a God of order, not chaos (Genesis 1-2). In 1 Corinthians 14:40 we find instructions to be orderly in the church. 1 Timothy 3:4 describes the qualifications of an elder (character traits to which we all should strive) as one who manages his house well. Elders are also called to be sober minded or orderly in 1 Timothy 3.

you had the time or the space, or knew where to find what you needed for a particular project whose time has perhaps long since passed?

(8) Be giving and share what you have (Luke 3:11). Could the things which you hoard be of more immediate use to another? Why are you not sharing them?

b) Biblical Exegesis

i) Matthew 6:19-21 – “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

- “Hoarders build up their treasures on earth, and their emotions, well-being, and happiness are directly tied to the items they have acquired. However, the Bible says this should not be so and encourages us to invest in things with eternal significance.”³⁹

ii) Luke 12:15 – “Then he said to them, ‘Beware and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.’”

- “God does not want everything we do and everything we think about to be focused on what can be collected or possessed in this world. Greed and things can become idols we put before God.”⁴⁰

iii) Matthew 19:21 – “Jesus said to him, ‘If you want to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’”

³⁹ Clinton, Timothy E. *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*. Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2013), 210.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 210.

- “God wants us, as Christians, to be willing to give up whatever possesses and controls us, just as He gave up everything for mankind. If we put too much of our heart in what we own, our treasure will only be in this world. Sometimes God may ask us to give up everything and follow him.”⁴¹ “The rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-30 discovered that the stuff he owned now owned him, and his possessions were the cause of his demise. It was not his material wealth that was the problem, but rather it was that he valued his possessions so much that he was unwilling to let go of them... He chose his stuff over the Savior... Covetousness chains the heart to things that are passing away.”⁴²
- iv) Col 3:1-2 – “Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.”
- Hoarding stuff requires that there be an unholy focus on the things of this earth.
- v) Other relevant Scripture:
- Exodus 20:3 – You shall have no other gods before Me.
 - Proverbs 11:26 – He who withholds grain, the people will curse him; But blessing will be on the head of him who sells it.
 - Proverbs 11:24 – There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more, And there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want.
 - Proverbs 22:8-9 – He who sows iniquity will reap vanity, and the rod of his fury will perish. He who is generous will be blessed For he gives some of his food to the poor.

⁴¹ Clinton, Timothy E. *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*. Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2013), 211.

⁴² C J Mahaney et al., *Worldliness : Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008), 106.

- Proverbs 1:13; 15 – We will find all kinds of precious wealth, We will fill our houses with spoil...My son, do not walk in the way with them. Keep your feet far from their path.
- Ecclesiastes 5:12-13 – The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep. There is a grievous evil *which* I have seen under the sun: riches being **hoarded** by their owner to his hurt.
- Haggai 1:9 – *You* look for much, but behold, *it comes* to little; when you bring *it* home, I blow it *away*. Why?” declares the LORD of hosts, “Because of My house which *lies* desolate, while each of you runs to his own house.
- Luke 12:33-34 – Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
- Luke 12:16-21 – And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years *to come*; take your ease, eat, drink *and* be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This *very* night your soul is required of you; and *now* who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who **stores up** treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”
- 1 Corinthians 10:14 – Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.
- Phil 4:12 – I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.
- Colossians 3:5 – Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.
- 1 Timothy 6:6 – But godliness *actually* is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment.
- James 5:1-3 – Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have **stored up** your treasure!

c) Possible Heart Idols

- i) Happiness.⁴³ Perhaps the one who hoards values happiness and feels that her things will bring her that. If she thinks that happiness comes from materialistic possessions; however, she needs to think again. Mahoney says accurately, “The happiness that comes from stuff functions much like a drug, creating a temporary sense of order or status that can become so intoxicating we need greater “stuff-hits” to maintain it.”⁴⁴
- ii) Importance.⁴⁵ Perhaps she feels a sense of pride in her possessions and this makes her feel important. If one finds her identity in stuff, then the amount of stuff acquired makes her feel important. Is there a sense of entitlement, a desire for the best of the best because it is deserved? This is pride and self-centeredness. Again, sinful thinking.
- iii) Security.⁴⁶ Prosperity can be a test that reveals where you are placing your trust. A leader of a persecuted church in Romania was heard to say, “95% of believers who face the test of persecution pass it, while 95% who face the test of prosperity fail it.”⁴⁷ We are to depend upon God, not ourselves. Those who hoard are both wealthy and poor, but in either case may collect things to excess because it makes them feel secure. They have everything they need for every circumstance – somewhere in the pile. Both prosperity and lots of stuff can lead to a false sense of security.

⁴³ C J Mahaney et al., *Worldliness : Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008), 99-101.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 101-102.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 103-104.

⁴⁷ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale 19889).

iv) Identity. She may say that this is just who I am. She desires to serve others and needs stuff to have ready for any and all possibilities. The problem comes when, because of the overabundance of stuff, the specific item needed requires much time to locate and then there is no space to do the work that may prove helpful. So the opportunity to help is lost or requires so much time that other responsibilities are put off. Is there pride here? Is Christ her identity and as such completely sufficient. Or is she relying on “things” for a sense of purpose and worth?

5) BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN COUNSELING

a) Fear

- i) “For many hoarders, the process of sorting, deciding what to do with, and potentially discarding and getting rid of items is an experience they avoid at all costs because it is emotionally overwhelming to them.”⁴⁸
- ii) “Hoarders are quick to assume unrealistic expectations of what will happen if they throw or give away an item. They may think people will abandon them, they may have disturbing feelings, and they may feel lonely or lost.”⁴⁹
- iii) “It is common for hoarders to believe bad things will happen to them in regard to removing possessions, so it can be helpful to challenge this distorted thinking.”⁵⁰

b) Lack of Trust in God

⁴⁸Clinton, Timothy E. *The Quick-Reference Guide to Addictions and Recovery Counseling : 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-To-Use Action Steps*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 207.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 208.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 209.

i) “While it is good to save we must be on guard from hoarding. The world we live in today loves wealth and material possessions, but we are to be set apart from the world.”⁵¹

c) Biblical Change (Eph 4:22-24; Rom 12:2)

i) Put-off wrong beliefs.

(1) Beliefs about usefulness. “Beliefs about the usefulness of objects can lead a person to confuse ‘wanting’ with ‘needing’.”⁵² The Bible cautions us about putting “wants” on the same level with “needs”. This is the first step in the “want” becoming an idol that takes a person away from true worship of the One worthy.

(2) Perfectionism and fear of making a mistake. Fear of making mistakes can be so strong that it leads people to avoid making decisions about what might be disposed of. Connected to this is an exaggerated sense of responsibility to properly dispose of items.⁵³

(3) Attachments to possessions.⁵⁴ Extreme attachment to any earthly object or blessing does not please God. We are to hold all with an open hand. If disposing of objects for the purpose of reducing clutter so that rooms can be used for their

⁵¹ Chery, Fritz. “15 Helpful Bible Verses about Hoarding.” Bible Reasons | Bible Verses About Various Topics, October 11, 2021. <https://biblereasons.com/hoarding/>.

⁵² David Tolin, Randy Frost, and Gail Steketee, *Buried in Treasures : Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 39.

⁵³ October 11, 2021. <https://biblereasons.com/hoarding/>.

⁵³ Tolin, *Buried in Treasures : Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding*, 40.

⁵⁴ October 11, 2021. <https://biblereasons.com/hoarding/>.

⁵⁴ Tolin, *Buried in Treasures : Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding*, 41.

original intended purpose causes discomfort or stress, then one should question the level of attachment she has to the items being considered for removal.

- (4) Objects as source of identity. “For many people with hoarding problems, possessions serve as reminders of who they are – or, in many cases, who they want to be.”⁵⁵ A Christian’s identity is in Christ. She is to find her worth as a child of God, not in the possessions she owns or how many possibilities she sees those possessions providing for doing good. For the person who is extreme in storing-up and acquiring, the good intentions often don’t get put into action.
- ii) Be transformed in your mind or in your thinking.**
- (1) Through the Word of God
- (2) Meditate on His promises, in particular His promise to provide for His children (Matt 6:25-34), and the security that we have in salvation (Romans 8:29-31).
- (3) Meditate on His attributes, in particular those attributes that would increase our trust in Him. For example His omniscience (He knows all things, therefore knows what is best for us), His omnipotence (He is all powerful and so is able to cause anything in His will to happen.), and thirdly, that He is good (therefore all that He wills and brings about will be for good). Given these three attributes of God, we can trust Him completely.⁵⁶
- iii) Put-on right thinking.**
- (1) Trust in God for your provision.

⁵⁵ David Tolin, Randy Frost, and Gail Steketee, *Buried in Treasures : Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 42.

⁵⁶ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2016).

- (2) Appreciate your identity as a child of God, as one in Christ.
- (3) Dwell on your treasure in heaven, where Christ is, not on earthly things (Col 3:)
- (4) Desire to obey the commandments in Sec 3. a. iii., especially to be generous and share.

6) SUGGESTED MODUS OPERANDI

- a) Salvation.** First and foremost is to determine if your counselee possesses, by the grace of God, saving faith. Invite them to share their testimony. Ask them questions about who God is, their journey to repentance and confession, what the cross means to them, and their response to the work of Christ. Look for evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit and a changed life.
 - i)** If there is no evidence, then the focus should be on evangelism and the presentation of the gospel. Spend whatever time is necessary to walk them through gospel truths, using the Bible to present who God is and what He requires of us; who we are as sinners and our complete inability to make ourselves right with a holy and just God through our own works. Explain the work that God in Christ accomplished on the cross; and our appropriate response to this work, accepting Christ as our Lord and our Savior. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in a redeemed person's life, biblical counseling has no hope of providing real help.
 - ii)** If the evidence is sufficient, then proceed with the biblical counseling agenda provided below.

- b) Love⁵⁷** - Build connections and provide hope. Offer these things yourself and help to put in place the one anothers of the body of Christ as described in Scripture – accountability, support, instruction, prayer, love, forgiveness. To help instill hope, speak of God’s promises to give us all that we need to live a life of godliness (2 Peter 1:3).
- c) Know** - Gather Data
- i)** Ask general and specific questions to identify the extent and impact of the behaviors. Use the Personal Data Inventory (PDI) to start general and then go deeper. Ask when this habitual pattern of storing up and accumulating began. Learn how it progressed. Was there ever a time when she did not engage in it once it started? What were the circumstances prior to it starting again? Determine the impact this practice is having on others in the home. What is the level of obstruction in daily living activities such as cooking, bathing, and sleeping?
- ii)** Ask general and specific questions about the desires of her heart. Build on previous questions by asking questions such as: What was it that you were wanting when you acquired (*name an item*)? Did you achieve that? When you look at the things in your living room, what do you see? How does it make you feel? What fruits of the Spirit are evident because of the things you have? How do your things help you to serve Christ? How do they get in the way of that service? When you consider discarding something, what thoughts do you have? What questions do you ask yourself when considering acquiring something new? Who knows about this habitual pattern of

⁵⁷ Headings of Love, Know, Speak and Do come from the following resource: Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands : People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub, 2002).

- behavior? Do you care if others know? Finding out more information about the possible commandment violations in section 3. a. iii. above could be helpful here as well.
- iii)** Homework could be for the counselee to complete surveys that would encourage personal reflection and acknowledgement of the consequences of their behavior to encourage conviction. Surveys could also help to identify the level of impact the behavior is having on living activities.
- d) Speak – Instruct.** This can be divided into two main parts. The first part may not be necessary, but the second part will be ineffective if there is not first conviction that how she is living is not honoring to God, along with a subsequent willingness to explore heart issues that may be interfering with true worship.
- i) Conviction.** If the counselee is not of the mind that there is something wrong with how she is living (perhaps she is only there because a family member has insisted on it), this may be where you need to begin. The counselor should explore with the counselee the possible commandment violations addressed in section 3.a.iii. (pages 11-12). Additional Scripture could include:
- (1) 2 Peter 1:3-9 to address the “gospel gap”, or the difference between what one professes and how one lives.⁵⁸
- (2) Proverbs 1:5 A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel.

⁵⁸ Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2008), 2.

- (3) 1 Timothy 6:6-7 This is one of many warnings in the Bible about the love of money and what money can buy. True riches come from godliness with contentment, not in the things we possess.
- ii)** This second section of instruction would focus on spiritual change – the putting-off, mind renewal, and putting-on that is commanded in Scripture to address wrong thinking (Eph 4:22-24). Scripture that addresses sanctification as a process (Phil 2:12; 2 Cor 3:18) would be helpful here, as well as instruction in God’s promises to give us what we need to live godly lives (2 Pet 1:3). Time also would be spent addressing possible commandment violations listed in Section 3. a. iii. above (pages 11-12). Homework might involve reading *How People Change* by Timothy Lane or *Trusting God* by Jerry Bridges, along with highlighting points of application for each section read.
- e) Do – Apply what is learned.**
- i)** Practical steps that support putting-off the bad habits and putting-on God honoring ones.
- (1) Put-off bringing things into the home...
- (a) when there is no place to keep them that that does not interfere with the intended use of the room.
- (b) that do not have a near term purpose or use.
- (c) when there is no space to actually work on the intended project for which the item is thought to be used for.
- (2) Put-on appropriate removal of items – be giving and share; put on generosity and the mind of Christ.

- (a) Set criteria for items that can be removed through donating, selling, or throwing away.
 - (b) Start applying that criteria to items and begin sorting and giving. Share your treasures with others who will be able to use them.
 - (c) For items that are to be kept, organize like items together.
- ii)** Continue to work in God’s Word to transform thinking (mind renewal) so that you learn to trust in God’s provision and His sufficiency more, and also to increase in your desire to grow in Christlikeness through sacrificial giving and sharing what you have with others. Fear God alone.
- iii)** Identify someone in your local church who can be an accountability partner in your efforts to change.

7) CONCLUSION

So the question for anyone struggling with this habitual sin is, “What do I value most?” If the things of this earth are more important than an eternal mindset focused on God, then idolatry has a place in that person’s heart and must be purged with vigilance. Our God is not a God of chaos, but a God of order. If we reflect His image properly, we would strive to live an orderly life. A hoarder’s home does not reflect our God and is a poor witness to those who are aware of the chaos. When one is willing to give up so much (a functional household, witness and hospitality opportunities, relationships, time and work space) to keep a pile of stuff for whatever purpose, she must look inward and consider the idols lurking.

While psychiatric diagnoses such as Hoarding Disorder can open our eyes to see real human struggles, we must be careful not to let these same diagnoses distract us from Scripture’s

insights and spiritual causes or contributions.⁵⁹ Biblical counseling has much to offer the person who hoards. As you work with such a one, keep in mind that her things are not just objects heaped in what appear as chaotic piles, but rather her identity is wrapped up in them. Even though this is sin, this is why parting with objects is met with such visceral pain . Helping someone who hoards is not just about throwing things away. It is about tearing away idols in a Christian's heart so that she is free to find her identity in Christ sufficient. This is the way to the deepest form of help. Once the idols are gone, the stuff will follow.

The gospel frees us from the penalty of sin, gives us power over sin and will one day free us from the presence of sin. There is hope. The secular disease model with no objective measure for diagnosis and no medical treatment offers a lifetime of hopelessness. The Bible is sufficient for the one struggling to overcome any kind of habitual sin, even that of excessive storing-up and accumulation of material things. There is hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁵⁹ Ed Welch, "Hoarding and the DSM5," *CCEF* (blog), June 3, 2013, <https://www.ccef.org/hoarding-and-dsm-5/>.

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