

# God and Mammon

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*"The sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light."—ST. LUKE XVI. 8.*

IN the collection of sharp, stern sayings that we call the Sermon on the Mount there is this: "No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon." You find the same words again in St. Luke's Gospel, but here they are not isolated; they are in a setting, and the setting reduces their sharpness. Many things are said in the Gospel after a one-sided fashion. It must be so, for there are truths that cannot be driven home in any other way.

If you are always looking impartially at both sides of the question, you will never reach any conclusion. Both sides should be looked at, but not necessarily at once, nor with equal intentness.

"Ye cannot serve God and Mammon." There is a sharp contrast of light and darkness, of good and evil. Then wealth is an evil thing. You will remember that it is at least a hindrance to one who would enter the Kingdom of Heaven. If you would love God, you must hate wealth; if you would hold to God, you must treat riches with contempt. Yes, it is true. But in what measure? Is there no counterweight? Is there no course open to a Christian man but the following of St. Francis of Assisi? It is a course well worth taking, but a Francis is needed to call men forward. I have not the face to bid them go. Mine is the unheroic part of balancing the counterweight.

## The Irony of the Parable.

It is here in St. Luke. He brings the saying about God and Mammon into connection with the Parable of the Unjust Steward. It is a strange parable, full of that irony of the Gospel which often goes unrecognized. As the goodness of God is illustrated by the Parable of the Unrighteous Judge, so diligence in the Christian life is illustrated by the malpractices of this dishonest servant. The lesson is driven straight home. The man's prudent care for his own future is made an example to be followed—with a difference. Viewed from his own standpoint, it is excellent. Anyone viewing it from the same standpoint will praise him; the very master whom he has robbed will applaud his cunning. It is a common thing. So much carefulness—so much careful dishonesty—in providing against want. You can almost hear the sigh which accompanies the ironic comment: "In regard to their own surroundings the sons of this world are more provident than the sons of the light." But the sons of the light are told to learn the lesson, to go to the unjust steward, to consider his ways and be wise. And so you have this tremendous saying: "Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when failure comes you may find a welcome in eternal dwellings."

## A Startling Paradox.

The mammon of unrighteousness. The natural medium for the cunning of the dishonest steward. By means of this you are to open doors into the mansions of the blest. Dives should have spent freely on Lazarus

at his doorstep, and then Lazarus would have introduced him to Abraham's bosom. But they that have riches can hardly enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Is the wealth that hinders also a help, a means of salvation? What complication have we here? Then you are told to be "faithful in the unrighteous mammon." It is startling. How, then, can wealth be an evil thing? It is a sacred charge entrusted to you by God; and further, a proper use of it is made a condition of receiving better things. If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? The sharp contrast of God and mammon is qualified, is modified. Indeed, the peremptory saying about the impossibility of serving both God and mammon has so little connection with the parable and its lesson that we may reasonably suppose the Evangelist to have introduced it in this place for the express purpose of emphasizing the qualification. It does not seem to have been the way of our Lord Jesus Christ to balance one statement against another. He left that work to His disciples, and it is a work that we have to do.

Doing this, we may find that in recording that peremptory statement we have to lay stress on the idea of service. You cannot be at once the servant of God and at the service of wealth. Wealth is not to be a master; you are not to live for this; it must be itself a servant; it is to be used; it is a means, and not an end. That simplifies matters. Every decent moralist will say as much. But is this enough? Does that ringing proclamation mean no more than such a commonplace of morality? The alternative is not only of serving or using, to serve God, but to use mammon. There is the alternative of adhering or despising, of hating or loving. You can either hate or love a servant; and why despise what is useful? The problem is not so very simple. And what use of wealth is indicated? "Make to yourselves friends." Here also there is surely some irony. It is so easy for a rich man to make friends! But what sort of friends? "That they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles." Is that the kind of friend that naturally haunts the rich? Or is some very special use of riches indicated?

## A Franciscan Comment.

The rough Franciscan Stella has a voluminous comment on these words, the accumulation, doubtless, of much preaching. He finds no difficulty in understanding them. They point to unbounded almsgiving. He enlarges on the perils of wealth; he extols the spiritual privileges of the poor. A Franciscan may have the face to say such things. There is only one worthy use to be made of money; the part of faithful steward is to give it all away; "He hath dispersed abroad and given to the poor; his righteousness remaineth for ever."

The Franciscan comment seems to us hardly sufficient. The ruder forms of almsgiving are suspect. We are inclined to think them harmful; we have learnt, in fact, that they may do economic mischief, and that discovery must not be ignored. We, therefore, look about for other ways of exercising the stewardship of wealth. To hate wealth, even

as an employer of your time, seems almost impious, a quarrel against the providential ordering of the world. When Francis, the son of a well-to-do mercer, strips himself to a ragged coat, it looks like an evasion of responsibility.

## The Ideal.

Have you so learnt Christ? What is this? "If thou wilt be perfect, go, sell that thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." I am ashamed to preach vicarious poverty, but nevertheless have patience with me when I say that the Franciscan ideal is greatly needed in the Church. It is not the only way of faithful stewardship, but it is perhaps the only way in which hatred of the mastery of wealth can be sufficiently exhibited. The lesson of the cunning steward also is learnt and taught. Those who choose to have nothing, that they may possess all things, show that sons of the light can be as wise and provident as any sons of this world, laying up treasure in heaven as carefully as any of us will provide for lean years to come.

## The Almsgiving of the Gospel.

And almsgiving? The almsgiving so copiously commended in the Gospel has little in common with a good deal of activity which now usurps its name. It is not a careless disposal of your superfluity. It is not a ransom, a part of your accumulation bestowed on others that you may be able, either with an easy conscience or with some hope of success, to retain the rest for yourself. It is not a careful endeavour to redress the more glaring inequalities of social life, to set on their feet those who have been thrown down in the rush of baleful competition. That is an admirable thing to do. Charity organization is a good work, but perhaps it is not very well named. It may be made a work of love, but in respect of its aim it belongs rather to the sphere of justice than to the sphere of charity. The almsgiving of the Gospel—let us be candid—is in a way more self-regarding. It is to give what is unquestionably your own, what you have a right to retain, and to give so that you feel the pinch. If, indeed, you give away what your family needs, if you do not provide for your own, you will come under the condemnation of St. Paul as something worse than an infidel; but that is because you are giving what is not properly your own. And further, this almsgiving is to give—the Gospel is honestly outspoken here—in hope of a reward. It is not that you can purchase the reward. That thought will destroy the character of the act, and rob it of all efficacy. You are not to press the parable of the unjust steward so far. It is rather that by almsgiving you render yourself capable of enjoying the reward.

## The Lesson of the Parable.

Here lies the ultimate lesson of the parable. It points to a revaluation of the things of life. You live in the present, for you can live nowhere else. You enjoy the good things of life; they are meant to be enjoyed. But in a greater degree they are meant to be used for future ends. The prudent sons of the light will so use them for ends that are eternal. It is foolish to despise the science of economics; but it is more foolish to suppose that the science of economics covers the whole range of human life. The Gospel does not condemn the possession or enjoyment of wealth, but it condemns without reserve the common valuation of wealth. And the condemnation takes this form: "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee."

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