

"GIVING TO THE SUPPORT OF THE CHURCH."

A sermon preached by the Right Rev. the Lord Bishop of Toronto in St. Alban's Cathedral, on Sunday morning, March 12th, 1899, from the words "How much owest thou unto my Lord?"—Luke, xvi., 5.

I am moved to speak to you some very plain words this morning on a subject which is vital to the carrying on of God's work amongst us—giving to the support of the Church. At the outset, distinction must be made between two kinds of giving, which have become confused in our modern view of the question—giving to God for the maintenance of His worship, and giving in charity for the relief of the poor. It is the first of these I have to speak of and endeavour to place on its proper basis. In the Old Testament, we find this fundamental principle unmistakably asserted by God—as applying not to Jew only but to man, that God is the universal proprietor—the great "house-holder" as He is described in our Lord's parables, or in our modern language, "landlord;" and that all men are His tenants-at-will, occupying under Him, enjoying from Him advantages of possession which, if common and highly regarded, are of priceless value, very necessities of life. Such are the air we breathe; the light which fertilizes and gladdens; water, an indispensable element of life; the soil, with its powers of production, and the like. Now for all these, freely enjoyed, He demands a return by way of rental, claims a definite, proportionate share of our earnings from the use of His gifts, as His due. In the next place, it is equally plain from the same Scriptures, as well as obviously reasonable, that the object to which He has ordained that this payment shall be made is His worship. The worship of God is the first and highest duty for which man was created; it is a necessity of his spiritual nature, it must be maintained in the earth; and for its maintenance God has provided by the devotion to it of the dues payable to Him by the tenants of His earth and users of His gifts. Alms-giving is a different matter altogether—it is wholly voluntary. The Bible exhorts to its practice frequently and urgently, but places it on a different basis—the duty of showing mercy, compassion, brotherly kindness. Charity, under the Gospel, is exalted into the primacy in the trinity of Christian graces—it is the more excellent way, the very bond of peace and of all virtues. But I am not seeking this morning to move you to the exercise of charity. Contributions to the building of a church or the stipend of the clergyman, or the maintenance of the services in fitting propriety are not charity at all. In urging upon you this duty I cannot appeal to your charitable sentiments, or use arguments to move your human sympathies; I dare not hold out the incentive of recompense, such as the promise attached to alms-giving, "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and look, what he layeth out, it shall be paid him again." No, I must rest my case upon another, because the true issue, and press upon your consciences the plain, abrupt question, "How much owest thou unto my Lord?" I venture to say that this question and its honest answer contains the whole solution of the vexed problem of Church finance. It is plain that if all the members of our Church were led by the grace of God to yield to it a practical and conscientious answer, every pecuniary difficulty that now perplexes and paralyzes our counsels would immediately vanish. You notice how personal as well as direct the question is; It is not asked of the congregation as a whole; we cannot shelter ourselves from its probing inquisition behind numbers; it is asked of each individual separately, "How much owest thou unto my Lord?" And it must be answered by each one separately for himself. God requires it; and He will have the answer; if not now, then in that day when He will call His stewards to render an account of their stewardship—a strict and solemn account it will be which each one will have to give before the judgment-seat of Christ. The answers must needs be various. One may find that he owes more; another less; but each something. All are

not equally endowed; but there are gifts of which all have received, and there is nothing the least favoured has that he has not received. If you really try to arrive at some accurate answer to this enquiry, you will take account not only of those free gifts of God, already mentioned, generally so thoughtlessly accepted, but of His prospering blessing upon your undertakings, which is the measure of their success, of the protection He has accorded you from danger, accident or disease, and of all the comforts and enjoyments you have known—social, domestic and personal—not forgetting the advantages under which you happily live in peace, freedom and security, in a favoured land, under benign government. Of course many of these items of indebtedness to the gracious Sovereign King it is impossible for us to appraise at a money value. To this side of the enquiry we may be content to answer, "I cannot tell. My debt is incalculable. All that I have I owe to the goodness of my Lord." As to that other class of benefits received, which the Christian will acknowledge as before all, the computation of them will seem more hopeless still. I mean His spiritual blessings, the free gifts of grace—God's inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, the means of grace here and the hope of glory hereafter; when he sits down to attempt the reduction of these to some aggregate of value that shall express what they mean to him of benefit, he finds himself lost in the computation of infinities, and can only take refuge, like David, in the generalities of adoring wonder. "Oh, how great is the sum of them! If I should count them they are more in number than the sand." But I take it that when we would ascertain how much is due from us to God for the maintenance of His worship, it is not so much our spiritual debts that we are called upon to compute as how much it is obligatory upon us to pay to Him, as our Lord, in rental for the temporal benefits held by us in tenure from Him for our profit. Is it possible that our Church members in these days make this a matter of deliberate calculation? Have you ever done so? When we see the denomination of the coins habitually placed in the offertory plates, on the one day of Christian worship, and contrast it with the amounts unhesitatingly, unstintingly paid for any form of amusement or entertainment on every day devoted to the worship of the world, can we for a moment conceive such a calculation to have dictated the contribution. If it were so, then I say that to select the smallest coin that is current, and to place it in the offering to the Lord at His holy table, as a response to the challenge, "How much owest thou to my Lord?" is to offer an awful, a daring affront to His Divine Majesty. I do not mean to depreciate the widow's mite which the Lord commended. God forbid! But the widow's mite has been made the scape-goat of innumerable meannesses. The widow of her poverty cast into the treasury of God all the living that she had. The preponderating five-cent pieces that are found in every Church plate do not represent so many widows pinched with poverty, but almost so many people more or less prosperous, who can never have asked themselves the question, "How much owest thou unto my Lord?" Now, brethren, this general absence of all principle and method regulating people's contributions to Church purposes is as unreasonable as it is deplorable. You know that in your worldly business you would account it the extreme of impudence and unwisdom. The moral which our Lord drew from the parable rebukes it: "The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." Each one of the debtors to the certain rich man could answer off-hand and in exact figures to the steward's question: "How much owest thou unto my Lord?" Each one of you could answer the like question in regard to your business with equal readiness; and is it true that you have so loosely conducted your relations with the God you own as Lord and Master as never to have even investigated how much you owe Him. The searching enquiry is not to be put off by the easy assertion that in this matter you are free to exercise your discretion to give or not to give, to give much or to give little as your mood dictates—that your offer-

ings to God's house and service are not dues to be claimed from you as of right, but voluntary gifts on your part. It is impossible that you can seriously entertain or defend such a position; you know that you are a debtor to God, and that He requires at your hand something more than caprice may dispose you to give. The question is, "How much? Why not settle it with yourself? Why not, in the sight of God and with the sanction of prayer to Him for His guidance, determine, once for all, the definite proportion of your income, or the weekly sum which it is your duty to set apart for His worship, in return for all you receive from Him? Any fixed conclusion you may come to and faithfully carry out is surely more satisfactory, easier and happier than the aimless, spasmodic, variable, haphazard practice of giving on impulse without plan or system that is so unhappily prevalent. The proportion which God enjoined upon the Jews in the law was one-tenth—a considerably smaller proportion than your earthly landlord exacts from you for the rent of your house. But I am not going to insist upon the perpetual obligation of tithes; though I claim that our Christian liberty should lead us to devise more liberal payment to God than was exacted from the Jew, as we owe more to Him under the Gospel than he under the law; and the institution of tithes must be taken to express the mind of God which changes not. Still, if all the members of the Christian Church systematically devoted half of this proportion of their income to this purpose there would be more than enough in the treasury of God to maintain His house and worship throughout the world, in the amplest efficiency. There would be no more need to resort to such unworthy expedients, worldly, cumbersome, often distinctly evil, concerts, bazaars, theatrical performances, lotteries, for Church purposes; no more of those incessant and irritating appeals from the pulpit which threaten to turn the very means of grace into an occasion of begging for money. If you brethren of this congregation, each one, determined to devote this or a reasonable proportion of your income to the offertory, there would no longer appear a deficit on our monthly service account as there does now, in spite of a voluntary choir and almost all offices rendered without remuneration; there would no longer remain the standing disgrace to our Church of this beautiful building so well begun, at a standstill for all these years, the very interest on its debt unpaid with all the efforts made to collect it, and the most splendid church property in this country lying under the perpetually impending peril of foreclosure. I commend this subject—if you have not already determined it—to your individual and earnest consideration, as an exercise eminently suitable to this season of Lent. There are some I know, but they are few, I fear, who do conscientiously practise the rule of proportionate giving. They will testify how wholly satisfactory it is—that having separated this definite sum as God's portion—what is given from it is not missed and the giving of it does not cause that twinge of pain that commonly accompanies the extortion of a donation—but, instead, a feeling of pleasurable satisfaction. All this you will know, and, in addition to it, that blessing of God which falls upon those who give Him glory, when you have honestly answered the question, "How much owest thou unto my Lord?"

The Churchwoman.

This Department is started for the benefit of Women's work in the Church in Canada. Its object will be to treat of all institutions and societies of interest to Churchwomen. Requests for information, or short reports for publication will receive prompt attention. Correspondence will be welcome, and should be brief, addressed to the Editor "Ruth," care of CANADIAN CHURCHMAN.

ANGLICAN SISTERHOODS.

Without entering into any discussion upon the *raison d'être* of sisterhoods, or trenching upon the ground of the religious sanction for these communities, I purpose to give a little sketch of their