



CHRISTIANITY 
 AND WEALTH.

BY

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CHRISTIANITY AND WEALTH:

A SERMON

—IN THE—

Church of the Covenant,

BY THE

REV. J. H. MCILVAINE, D. D.,

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“ If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches ?

And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man’s, who shall give you that which is your own ?”—Luke VI: 11, 12.

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The Lord is here speaking of the nature and uses of property. He calls it the “mammom of unrighteousness,” because it has had so much to do with human selfishness and dishonesty and cruelty ; because it has been so often wickedly obtained, and wickedly used. He contrasts this material wealth with wealth of another kind. To be faithful in the use of earthly wealth is to be faithful in that which is of very little value, but fidelity in the inferior trust is the test of fidelity in higher matters. He says, if we are not faithful in the use of this material wealth, we cannot receive from God the real and enduring riches. And He declares further, that this material wealth is not really our own ; we hold it for a time as stewards ; it is committed to us as a trust ; and if we are not faithful in the use of that which is not ours but another’s, we cannot hope that God will bestow upon us an inheritance which shall be truly and forever our own.

This is in harmony with the whole strain of the New Testament teaching. Saint Paul describes Christians as the bond servants of Christ. Not only their property but themselves belong to Him. They are His without qualification or reserve. Their bodies belong to Him, and the

muscles which they use in physical labor ; their minds with the knowledge, judgment, and tenacity of purpose, with which they conduct their affairs. Their souls are His, for He has redeemed them. "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price : therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

Or, if we prefer the more honorable title of children, we have no firmer hold on our wealth. We are children in our Father's house, but the house is His and all in it. He feeds and clothes us, but the food and clothing are not ours but His. It is one of the first requisites in entering the kingdom of Christ, that we renounce our personal claim on all the things that we have been used to call ours, money, time, influence, faculties, and powers. We part with all property in ourselves, and that includes the parting with property in everything else. It is just as imperative now, as it ever was, to forsake all and follow Him. Do you say this is a stern and difficult law, that it makes life gloomy and austere ? Not so, it is a blessed law, and it makes life free and joyous. It quenches the passions that often consume men's strength and shorten their days. If wealth be not ours, if when we think of it as ours we are thieves at heart, unjust stewards, making our own that which belongs to God, why should we be so hot in pursuit of it ? It is pleasant to have the use of wealth for a time, just as it is pleasant to stay in comfortable and luxurious quarters when we are travelling, but we ourselves are none the richer because, for a day or two, we are guests in a splendid hotel. It is pleasant to have command of money, but it is

not ours, any more than the rents, which an agent collects for an estate, are his. You may prefer to have the position of a steward, who controls and administers a great estate, to the position of one, who manages a small one. The higher position brings with it an increase in the sources of personal comfort, and some things more valuable than those that contribute to personal comfort. In either position, the wealth that passes through our hands is not ours.

If we take this view of wealth, the disposition to get it unfairly, unjustly, too eagerly, will be checked. Other men are God's stewards, as well as ourselves. When we are trying to get what is in their hands, we are trying to get possession of property that is not theirs, that cannot become ours ; that has been entrusted to them, and not to us. It is the case of one agent trying to collect the rents of an estate, under the management of another agent of the same employer. This habit of regarding wealth will relieve us of anxious care, as well as of the passion for money. We say we are children in the Father's house, but how few of us have the spirit of children, the trustfulness, the light-heartedness, freedom from anxiety and fear of the future. We are children in our Father's house, but we insist upon being grown-up children, and we have private speculations of our own in cotton and corn, in iron and railways and ships. No wonder we are wearied with anxious care. It is not until we become children in spirit as well as in name, in practice as well as in theory, and cease to hold anything as our own, that the true temper and blessedness of God's children will become ours.

It is necessary to lay firm hold of this conception of property, if we would make right use of what the Lord says about the duty of charity and benevolence. Charitable gifts are too often spoiled by a spirit of Pharisaism. Men have come to regard their property as their own. In appropriating a part of their property for the relief of the poor, or for educational, or other public ends, they have plumed themselves on their generosity. And they are generous, according to the world's conception of property. But it would be quite as reasonable for the trustees of a great educational endowment to claim credit for personal generosity, because they appropriate the revenues of the trust to educational purposes. The money is not theirs; they are bound to appropriate it according to the terms of their charter. And according to the Lord's conception of property, the same is true of us. We are not the owners, but the trustees. The purposes to which the trust is to be appropriated are not rigidly defined by any instrument, but that does not cancel the obligation. The trust cannot be enforced by any court, but, for the Christian man, the law of liberty and the law of love are as real as the law of the land, and defended by more imperative sanctions.

There is a common phrase, the "sacredness of property," that is a very noble and suggestive one. It reminds us that questions effecting property are not to be settled by custom, or precedent, or the usages of the world about us; not by public or private convenience, or formal legislation, but by the laws of God. Property is sacred because it belongs to God. He has something to say about its use. The Lord

Jesus came to assert his authority over the whole of human life. His claims are not met by merely reciting the Christian creed, or the offering of Christian worship. We must understand, and accept, and obey his laws for the direction of conduct. But property has a very large place in human life, never larger than now. We are earning money, investing money, spending money, using the things that money purchases, every day and all day long. If Christ had not given us directions concerning property, he would have left a large part of life free from his control.

This conception of property determines what uses of it are legitimate. God intends us, first of all, to provide for our own needs, and the needs of our children and dependents. Saint Paul, in his letter to Timothy, says: "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel." These needs vary with the circumstances of men, their training, occupations, and the social functions they have to discharge. Every man must form his own judgment, and exercise his own conscience, as to what expenditure upon himself and his own house, God will approve. He is God's servant; he serves a generous master; he may use his income freely in whatever expenses are legitimately incurred in doing God's work, in whatever will enable him to do God's work to the best advantage. He may move from a small house into a large one; he may have his horses and carriages; he may surround himself with pictures and articles of luxury; if he thinks he can thereby serve God more effectively. But those who believe in the sacredness

of property, will be slow to incur a large increase of personal expenditure, without the prospect of securing a corresponding increase of personal efficiency.

Then God intends that every man, whose income covers more than the necessities of his own life and work, shall use a part of it (however much he must judge for himself, as having to give an account to God) in serving others. The form in which the service is rendered must be determined by the man's position, circumstances, faculties. One man is specially called to shelter the homeless ; another, to care for the orphans ; another, to promote education or scientific discovery ; another, to develop art and literature ; another to strengthen great movements for the social and political improvement of mankind. All Christian men will desire to have some share in relieving the common misfortunes of human life, in increasing the well-being of men, in making known the gospel of divine righteousness and love. The general law is clear and definite. Our money is God's money ; we are to spend nothing as God does not want it spent.

Perhaps some will say this theory is visionary and unpractical, the kind of theory likely to commend itself to an enthusiast unfamiliar with the business and the affairs of the world, but absolutely useless for the guidance of conduct. This is exactly what the Pharisees thought about the teaching of the Lord, when they heard this theory of property from his lips. "The Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things, and derided him." And what was his answer to their scoffing? He gave them

another parable, that of the rich man and Lazarus. There is nothing in the parable to indicate that the rich man was a bad man, in the common acceptation of the word. He was rich, but there was nothing to indicate that he did not get his wealth honestly, and spend it honorably. He was clothed in purple and fine linen, but there is no reason to suppose that he did not pay for them. He fared sumptuously every day, but it does not follow that he was a glutton or a drunkard. He was rich, and he regarded his property as his own, to do with as he pleased, to spend as he liked, to use wholly upon himself if he chose ; no one else had any claim upon it. It never occurred to him that it all belonged to God. He never thought, that since his property belonged to God, he was guilty of a grave breach of trust in not using it in God's service for the good of others. This was his sin, and this brought upon him his doom.

And still a third time the Lord enforces this lesson. " And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully : And he thought within himself, saying : What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits ? And he said : This will I do : I will pull down my barns, and build greater ; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my Soul ' Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years ; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.' But God said unto him, ' Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee ; then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided ?' So is he that layeth

up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Here again we have the same mistake—"my barns," "my fruits," "my goods,"—and the same lesson, they were not *his* barns, *his* fruits and *his* goods, but God's. He had only a life interest in them.

This is just as much a part of Christ's gospel, as His gentlest words of compassion for human sorrow, or His largest assurances of forgiveness for human sin. It belongs to the very substance of the gospel, for the divinest element of the gospel is the declaration that Christ came to make His life our life. If His life does not become ours, his great purpose has failed; He has not saved us. But in those who receive the life of Christ, there will be also the mind of Christ. His estimate of riches, possessions, honors, will be their estimate. They will call nothing their own; they will hold everything in trust for God.

Brethren, I know that many of you are trying earnestly to take Christ's view of life. You regard yourselves as His, in the sweet ownership of love, and all you have as belonging to Him from whom comes every good and perfect gift. Your great desire is to use what He has entrusted to you in a manner pleasing to him. Your great difficulty is to know when, and where, and how to use it, as He wishes. The claims upon you are so many and varied, the cry of human need comes to you from so many quarters, eager hands are stretched out to you from so many sides, that you are often in great perplexity and hesitation. I fear I cannot give you any help. It is hardly for me even to suggest. It is between you and God. If the will be there,

and the spirit, and the prayer for guidance ; if you truly put yourselves and your possessions into His hands, earnestly desiring to know and do His will, I believe His will will be made clear, His guidance will not be wanting. There is one matter, however, which perhaps you have not thought about, that I should like, if you will permit me, to bring to your attention in closing these remarks.

Have you ever thought much of the future of this Church? To some of you it is very dear. You have been with it perhaps from the very first; you have shared its sacrifices, its sorrows, its privileges, and its joys; it is connected with some of the most tender and sacred experiences of your life. Here, perhaps, God came to you and touched your heart and you gave yourself to Him; here, perhaps, you came for the first time to His Table, and for many years have held sacred communion with Him in the ordinances of His love. Here, perhaps, your children were baptized and taught, and you have seen them grow up into good men and women, and take their places in the service of the Church and the world. Here you have sat, side by side for years, with the sweet companions of your life; and here some of you have come for the last time with all that remained of your beloved ones, and have listened to the words of comfort and of hope, have been strengthened to bear your sorrow, and to look forward to a blessed meeting in the presence of the Lord. You have prayed for its prosperity; you have labored in its service; you have shared its anxieties; you have made sacrifices for its sup-

port ; you have believed in its mission ; you have trusted in its future.

In many respects, this future is a hopeful one. I think we can see for ourselves that the prospect is brightening. Looking back over three years, which are all that I can speak intelligently of, I see many reasons for encouragement. The congregations have very perceptibly increased. The Church membership has grown ; we have gained during this time more than twice as many as we have lost through dismissal and death. The Sunday School has increased threefold, and is steadily gaining in numbers and efficiency. The work has grown, is reaching out in new directions, and touching human life in more points than we are aware. While we come far short of what we might and ought to do, I doubt if there are many churches of its size in the country doing more or better work than this is doing. In every direction, save one, it seems to me that we are gaining. In one direction we are slowly and sadly losing. Every year some of those, who have been identified with the Church from the first, who have shared its burdens, who are able and ready to respond to its needs, and make sacrifices for its support, are taken from us to their reward. Their places are not and cannot be filled. We cannot expect those who have lately come among us to feel the same interest, the same devotion, the same obligation, that they felt.

Only one thing, as it seems to me, can make the future of this Church secure, and that is, its endowment. All the churches about us are either moving up town, or are being

endowed. The church at the corner of Madison Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street, of which Dr. Terry is the pastor, has an endowment of nearly \$100,000. The rector of the church nearest us—the Incarnation—is making every effort to secure an endowment, as essential to the maintenance of its position, and with good success. Dr. Alexander, of the University Place Church, is succeeding in his effort, and has already secured \$50,000.

I know that an endowment used to be considered an evil, and is still so considered by many. It may indeed be an evil. An endowment large enough to relieve the members of this Church of the need of effort and of sacrifice, might be a curse rather than a blessing; but an endowment large enough to relieve them from dangerous pressure, from a burden heavier than the Church can safely bear, to encourage them and assure them as to the future, and to enable us to reduce our pew rents and open our doors more widely, would be a very great blessing.

In this last respect the Church has a great difficulty to encounter, one I have felt more than anything else in my ministry. I have made careful inquiries, and I find few churches of our faith whose pew rents are so large as ours. This evidently puts us at a disadvantage. It influences more people than we know of in their choice of a church. How can this difficulty be met? I can think of but one way. Of course it can be met temporarily, by some of those to whom God has given more, taking upon themselves a part of the burden of those to whom He has given less. This relief would be but temporary. The number

of those willing to do this would be continually becoming less, and the burden becoming heavier than those who remain can bear. An endowment of \$100,000 would meet the difficulty permanently, enabling us to reduce our pew rents, and rendering the position of the Church permanently secure. As one after another of the churches about us move to more favorable localities,—as all the unendowed churches will eventually do,—this Church will have a more imperative work to do, a larger and a more important place to fill.

I wish this matter had been presented to the Church ten or fifteen years ago. I believe if their attention had been called to it, some of those who are no longer with us on earth, would gladly have left something to secure the future of the church and increase its usefulness, by means of which they would still be doing the work which they so loved to do while yet among us. Is it too late to speak of it now? I trust not. I know very little about your benevolence. It is flowing out in a multitude of channels that I know nothing about. But you will pardon me for saying that, from the little that has casually come to my knowledge, I know of \$350,000, which the members of this Church, in the past twelve months or a little more, have given to other institutions. I rejoice in these gifts. They are an evidence to me of how strongly and closely you hold this view of the sacredness of property which Jesus held; that you regard your possessions as entrusted to you by God, and are trying to use them according to His will. I believe you have been guided by His spirit, that your

gifts will be greatly to His glory and to the good of men. I would not, if I had the power, change any portion of them. Yet I feel for this Church somewhat as I have felt for poor Esau, when he came to his father with that great and exceeding bitter cry, "Hast thou but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father."

When I see the munificent endowments bestowed upon colleges, and seminaries, and benevolent institutions,—my own college in the past twenty years having received upwards of \$5,000,000, almost entirely from the hands of Presbyterians,—I cannot but wonder if Christians regard the Church of Jesus Christ as the only institution not worthy of large gifts, or not to be trusted in the use of large benefactions. When I see the immense sums given for opera houses, and music halls, and places of amusement, largely too by Christians, I cannot but wonder if they think these things are doing a more important work than the Church. When I see the superb way in which the clubs, which are springing up all about us, are managed (hardly one of them spending less than \$50,000 a year, and some of them two or three times that amount, and if half a million of dollars are wanted for the purchase of a new site, or for the erection of a new building, it is quickly forthcoming), I cannot but wonder why the hands of the Church are always tied, and its work hampered for the want of money; that it is always in the attitude of a mendicant and not of a queen.

Surely, with all its human imperfections and weaknesses, the Church of Jesus Christ is the best thing in the world

to-day, without which the world would be lost. Out of her bosom have come all of these educational, philanthropic, and benevolent institutions. They had not been but for her being; her life has given them life, and sustains their life; her teaching has taught men to be good and generous to them; and as her teaching prevails more widely, men will become more generous and self-sacrificing in every form of noble and helpful work. She is the fountain whence these healing streams do flow. Let us make the channels of the streams broad and deep, so that they may carry the healing waters to every home and every heart, but let us not neglect the fountain.

“Feed,” says the apostle Paul, “the Church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” “The Church of God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” Is it too much to ask that some of you, in considering how you can best use the possessions that God has entrusted to your care, in the manner most pleasing to Him, will give some consideration to this need of His Church, and ask for His guidance? Very likely you will not see the matter as I do, but in presenting it to you, I have tried to do my duty to Him, and to the Church to which has called me, and I can safely leave it in His hands.

