

GOD AND MAMMON

Christianity is big business for some. Last January, the federal government of the United States charged Staccato Powell and Sheila Quintana, officers in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, with fraud and conspiracy. Powell and Quintana used fraud to obtain mortgages on a number of church properties in California, and used the money for personal gain. Last April, lawyers for Celebration Church in Jacksonville, Florida, issued a report in which they stated that Stovall Weems, founder and pastor of the church, “violated the law by breaching his fiduciary duties to Celebration, committing fraud, unjustly enriching himself at the expense of the church, and failing to meet the fiduciary duties and standards of care required by his office.” Last month, the Council of Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal church condemned the actions of two of their ministers who received payments from a real estate developer in exchange for permission to develop distressed properties belonging to the church. Last November, When Dave Ramsey, of Ramsey Solutions, and executives that that business were in a deposition asked why their company did not fire one of its media personalities for violating its ‘righteous living agreement,’ they answered that the agreement includes coitus, but not other acts, like the one the employee had committed. Ramsey and other executives explained why his company has such an agreement with employees. He said, “When we hold ourselves out as Christians to the community, if an employee is doing something contrary to standard Christian beliefs, normative Christian beliefs, then the people that we deal with in the Christian community would feel that we are hypocrites, and it would damage our brand.” Christians must beware the seductive quality of money.

In the days of the Divided Monarchy of Israel, the people were exceedingly wicked. They regularly broke all of the Ten Commandments. They were so wicked that the Lord sent prophets to call on them to repent, and to warn them of the judgment that would come upon them if they would not. The prophet Amos preached against the covetousness, the greed of the people, and against their mistreatment of the poor and needy. He said to them:

Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail, Saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit? That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat? The LORD hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, Surely I will never forget any of their works. (Amos 8:4–7)

The Israelites devoured the needy, and would do away with all the poor. They would hire people for work, and, after the work was completed, they would not pay. Other prophets prophesied the same. Jeremiah the prophet said, “Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work.” (Jeremiah 22:13) Evil men lie awake at night thinking of ways to defraud. Micah the prophet said:

Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand. And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage. (Micah 2:1, 2)

They were religious frauds, hypocrites. They were eager for the festivals and sabbaths to end, so that they might return to defrauding people. Their weights and measures were not fair; they secretly tipped the balance in their favor, a thing forbidden in the law. In the book of Leviticus, it says, “Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure. Just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have: I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:35, 36) In Deuteronomy, it says:

Thou shalt not have in thy bag divers weights, a great and a small. Thou shalt not have in thine house divers measures, a great and a small. But thou shalt have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure shalt thou have: that thy days may be lengthened in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee. For all that do such things, and all that do unrighteously, are an abomination unto the LORD thy God. (Deuteronomy 25:13–16)

These laws the people disregarded. They loved money more than their fellow man, more than God. They were merciless, pitiless. If a man owed by a little, his creditor would for a small amount sell him into slavery, contrary to the law which says, “And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant.” (Leviticus 25:39) After sifting wheat, they did not throw out the chaff, but secretly mixed it in with the wheat so that they might sell at a greater weight. They would not escape the Lord’s justice. The Lord would render to them according to their works. They desired wealth, but He would bring them to ruin. He would send a heathen nation to conquer them and carry them away into exile. (Amos 7:11) He said, “Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel: I will not again pass by them any more: And the high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste; and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.” (Amos 7:8, 9) It happened as the prophet said. In the Second Book of Kings are recorded these words: In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.” (2 Kings 17:6)

In the days of Jesus's earthly ministry, many in Israel were proud and covetous. The Pharisees in particular craved honor and money. They lusted after praise and wealth. They did not love the people. They loved money, because they loved themselves. They cared not about the well being of others, but only about their own. They did not shepherd the sheep; they fleeced them. They cared nothing for the poor and needy; they cared only about their own comfort. When a Pharisee invited Jesus to dine with him in his home, Jesus observed that the Pharisees there chose for themselves the places of honor at the table. Jesus rebuked them for their pride. To the man whose home it was, Jesus said:

When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just. (Luke 14:12–14)

As Jesus often taught in hyperbole, so He did here. He did not mean that no one may invite to his home friends, and family, and wealthy neighbors. Nor did He mean that one may only invite the poor and the disabled. He did mean that one must not invite friends, and family, and the wealthy only, and he must not exclude people because they are poor or disabled. Jesus, as always, tells people to consider their motives. They must not invite only

those that will invite him in return, and so repay him. He must show hospitality to people even if they cannot repay.

Some time later, Jesus told His disciples the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward. Someone accused a rich man's manager of wasting the rich man's possessions, so the rich man demanded that his manager give an account of his possessions, or lose his position. The steward knew he was guilty as charged, and he feared that he would lose his position, and with it his income. He was not fit for manual labor, and he was too proud to beg. So, he took measures so that, when he lost his position, others would take care of him. He told his master's debtors that, if they paid a portion of what they owed, he would forgive the rest. When the master learned of the plan of his manager, he commended him for his shrewdness. Jesus then added these comments:

For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. 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? No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. (Luke 16:8–13)

Jesus did not here commend theft, or unrighteous means to righteous ends, as some have thought; rather, He compared the shrewdness of sinners with the naivete of the righteous, and by this comparison exhorted the righteous to be shrewd. As He told the Twelve before He sent them out, "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Matthew 10:16) Jesus told this parable about a concern with material things, but with it he taught a spiritual principle. He told His disciples to use whatever wealth they have to make friends. This is to say, they ought, in the name of Jesus, to use their money to help others, to assist the poor and needy, especially among God's people. If the Christian uses his money to give aid to those that need it, then, when he dies, and, having left this world, arrives in heaven, those friends he aided will be there to receive him with love and thanksgiving. He would not be like the rich man, who neglected poor Lazarus, and so perished for love of money, and lack of love for God and man. He would, for love of God and man, care for Lazarus, and so Lazarus would one day receive him into heaven. He will by his faithfulness prove his faith; he will have proved his faithfulness. Having proved his faithfulness in a small thing, like earthly treasure, he will receive the true treasure, eternal life with God, and with God's people.

A man who is righteous with little will be righteous with much. A man who is unrighteous with little will be unrighteous with much. If a man is not faithful with what another man entrusts to him, then no one will give that man anything to keep for himself. Earthly riches are something good, but they are not the true riches. The true riches are spiritual, and, if a man is not faithful with money, then God will not entrust Him with true riches. If a man is not faithful with the things of God, then God will not give that man anything of his own. In the nature of the case, a man cannot have two masters, which is to say, he cannot not love and faithfully serve two masters. If he has two masters, then he will hate one and love the other; or else he will be devoted to one, and despise the other. So a man cannot serve God and money. He cannot live both for God and for money. A man will either hate God and love money, or he will be devoted to God and despise money. God will have no rival. He commands man to love Him with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, which is to say, God commands man to love Him with everything He has. If a man loves God in this way, then he has love left

for money. Money is not wrong in itself. After all, it is God who prospers men. Money is a stumbling block for many, however, and tempts them to many sins. Men are tempted to do evil to get money, and having gotten it, they are tempted to do evil with it. Men ought righteously to gain wealth, and they ought righteously to spend it. Men work, and God prospers as He sees fit. He entrusts men with money, and He requires that they be good stewards of it.

But there is another lesson in this parable. Saint Luke records:

And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him. And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail. Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery. (Luke 16:14–18)

The Pharisees loved money, and, when they heard what Jesus said, they scoffed at Him. So, He rebuked them. He said that they led men to think that they were righteous, but they were not righteous. Men know only the outward appearance, but God knows the heart, and God knew that the hearts of the Pharisees were not with Him, but with money. The Pharisees and their supporters did not value what God valued. God gave the Pharisees a stewardship, a stewardship of managing His household. They managed it poorly, however, and were not faithful with what God had entrusted to them. Rather than upholding the law, they at certain points relaxed it. The law and the prophets were in force until John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Christ, the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom, and, although the Pharisees wanted no part of it, many men were striving to enter into it. (Matthew 4:17) Although the ceremonial law was fulfilled in Christ, the moral law continues forever. The Pharisees, however, on a number of points relaxed the law. For one, they taught that a man may divorce his wife and marry another, and they appealed to Moses' permission as ground. Jesus told them that Moses gave them that concession because their hearts were hard, but that it was not God's design for marriage. Jesus said, without qualification, "Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery." The Pharisees wished to ingratiate themselves to the people, and have the people honor them, and give them money, so they eased the law to accommodate the people. The Pharisees had no treasure in heaven, and there was no one to welcome them there, and they never did enter in. They perished in their sins.

Jesus said:

And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Luke 12:29–34)

Jesus taught His disciples not to make their primary concern either earthly needs, or earthly possessions. Those are the things that unbelievers concern themselves with. They ought to make their primary concern heavenly

things. The Christian ought not to be anxious about material needs, and he ought not to be too attached to material things. He ought rather to make his priority the kingdom of God. If he does that, then God will see to all his needs. The Christian ought not to make it his life's ambition to amass earthly wealth, which thieves can steal, and moths can destroy, but to have treasure in heaven, which is to say, eternal life with God. What a man does with his wealth shows where his heart is. If he uses His wealth for God, then he loves God, and God loves him.

Let us love God with all our hearts, and our neighbors as ourselves. Let us seek first the Kingdom of God. Let us use our wealth to help those in need.

Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honor, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.