

## Mammon and Me

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Money is the root of many evils.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Today's sermon is titled, 'Mammon and Me.' Mammon, a term familiar to those who grew up with the timeless and beautiful prose of the King James Bible, but one we don't see much today. In today's modern translation the word "mammon" is translated simply as 'money.' Our Gospel reading contained the oft quoted verse which the KJV expressed as mammon. "You cannot serve God and Mammon - money." The lectionary this week has its eye on wealth and the multitude of issues which surround it. It is a very serious topic and a quick glance at the news will inform you of its relevance. So let us examine what God has to tell us and explore how to live out His will.

But first let us pray for all those suffering in poverty, in near poverty; suffering from income inequality, from class exploitation; and for those who are hurting economically because of inflation or supply chain issues.

- Lord, Heavenly Father, we lift up to You those of your flock who go hungry at night, who endure the oppressive heat and freezing cold without shelter to reside in, those who fear losing their house or having utilities turned off. We humbly ask You in Your mercy to protect, save, and uplift those afflicted souls. You, O God, from Whom all blessings flow give us all things material, and so we pray You give such things as needed to those in need. And we ask you Lord to please guide our heart and alms to bring good from the wealth which you've seen fit to give us. This we pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen -

Jesus often spoke to His followers, and to us, in short stories called 'parables.' The structure of these narratives is similar to fables in the sense that each has a moral point which the whole narrative exists to drive home. Some of His parables are easy and incredibly straight forward, some He Himself explains after giving, but others are more elusive. The Parable of the Unjust Steward, or Dishonest Manager, is one of those which falls into the latter category. A lot of the debate stems from Jesus' apparent (keyword being 'apparent') praise of immoral behavior. The manager of the portfolio of debts in his last moments of control writes off portions of the debtors' accounts to curry favor with those who can support him once he is unemployed. Upon learning that he was cheated, the master of those account then *commends* the conniving manager for his "shrewdness." Now, there are many, many, **many**, different explanations about why the master would commend an act which cost him money, about whether the amount owed is entirely ethical or usurious, about if the manager had been charging exorbitant fees, et cetera. For our purpose today, we need not nitpick and criticize every single aspect of the narrative and can just focus on what point Jesus was making. What does Jesus say in conclusion to the parable? "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of

unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” I can feel that many of you are. . .concerned at Jesus telling us to use “unrighteous” wealth for our own benefit. But as I mentioned before, this statement is more nuanced than just the words taken in isolation would imply. Crucially, what exactly is “unrighteous wealth”? I tell you it is without a doubt not money gained through actions like robbery, fraud, and other sins like them. Yes, the manager’s unrighteous wealth is gained in that manner in the parable, but Jesus is contrasting us, sons of light--believers, with the sons of the world--unbelievers, like the manager. Their unrighteous wealth is gained in such a manner, but ours isn’t. Our unrighteous wealth is wealth that we put before God. It is the wealth that we hoard and fawn over. Wealth which some even kill and die over. Jesus makes this point painfully clear in His famous statement, which I will repeat again, “You cannot serve God and money.” To many, even believers, money is an idol which draws the heart away from God. In that sense, it is unrighteous wealth. As for who’s benefit, once again the fact that Jesus is contrasting two groups helps point us the right direction. The sons of this world use that money for earthly uses, passing and ultimately trivial uses. But the sons of light, us, we’re supposed to use it in an eternal focused way. I quote, “so. . .they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” Now to be clear, we’re not using cash to buy a spot in Heaven. No, nothing further from the fact. Rather, we’re supposed to use wealth, which we otherwise would hoard, on our fellow brothers and sisters so that there will be rejoicing in Heaven on that final day when all is accounted for, and all totals marked. In a single word, alms. Though it’s so much more than just giving to the poor. And don’t worry, I will talk extensively about all the ways we as believers ought to use our wealth.

Now let us talk briefly about the Old Testament reading. It is a simple, but poignant reading. God boldly declares that He will remember the wicked, wicked deeds of those who live to abuse the poor and underprivileged. The sins of mankind have not changed since The Fall first introduced sin to our world. Even almost 3,000 years ago there were those who grew fat on the exploitation of others. The charges God brings against these people echoes today. Right now, you have the same injustices being wrought. The needy are being trampled underfoot. The walls around the poor are closing in, closer to bringing them to an end. Prices are going up and record profits for those at the top are following. And the poor are on track to become perpetually indebted serfs of those above them. Just as He swore regarding those in the days of the ancient kings of Israel, so too today will He not forget the deeds of their modern-day counterparts. On judgement day they will surely answer for the grievances charged against them.

What, then, are we to make of all this? God regards the poor highly, and it is our duty as believers in Christ to use whatever wealth God has freely and richly given us to help and better our brothers and sisters; to use that wealth to thwart in every way possible the machinations of those who view the needy as simply a resource to be consumed and discarded. There isn’t enough time in the day to go through every verse in the Bible where God voices His

impassioned interest in the poor. I'm sure many of you can think of several off the top of your head. The Sermon on the Mount, [Matthew 5:3](#) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." [Deuteronomy 15:11](#) "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'" Not to mention several verses in Proverbs such as [Proverbs 19:17](#) "Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed." and [Proverbs 14:31](#) "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him." God makes it clear that we not only ought to help, but that we *must* help. Think of James' warning in his epistle. He warns that it is pointless, futile even, to merely say to a brother or sister in need "go and be warmed" and then withhold the food and clothing they so desperately need. Or, in a much more terrifying verse, when Jesus rebukes those who claimed to be His. He says to them that they never visited Him in prison or when He was sick, that He was hungry and they gave Him no food, thirsty and yet gave no drink, did not welcome Him though He was a stranger, and though He was naked, they gave Him no clothing. And they ask Him, "But Lord, when did we ever see you as such?" And He replies to them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Christ's own words! Ignoring a fellow person made in the image of God who is in need is tantamount to ignoring Christ Himself. And let's not kid ourselves. There is no shortage of people who are in need. In the year 2022, as we're still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic and now suffering from the knockdown effects of the war in the Ukraine and facing a global recession and brutal winter, an increasingly fewer number of our brothers and sisters are free from any economic uncertainty. Even not considering the millions of Americans who live below the poverty line, and the still millions more who toe the line and barely stay above it, a report published back in June of this year stated that 61% of Americans are currently living paycheck to paycheck. 61%. That is a shockingly large number. The majority of the people in this country are one bad day away from insolvency. Unfortunately, many economists are fearing that this is only the beginning of things to come. I won't stand up here and be a doomsayer, but my point is this. We all know people who are in need of our unrighteous wealth. Now of course, I understand that many of us may not be as secure as we'd like and that certainly impinges on our ability to give. But let's go over what we, as the body of Christ, can do.

First, as we should do with everything else, we should pray sincerely and often about this issue. In our epistle today we're even encouraged to offer "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving" to our leaders and those in high positions so that we may live a peaceful and quiet life. So, keep the poor, both at home and abroad, in your prayers and ask the Lord from whom all blessings flow to help His flock and to guide our aid. Giving directly is a simple and often effective method of relief and alms, but it has its downsides. On one hand, it is immediate relief for those who need. Sometimes it's just giving the homeless person at the intersection some loose bills you have, but other times it can be you spotting a friend or fellow neighbor when they've come up short. Giving directly can also be done through giving specific items like buying that homeless person a meal or giving your neighbor your unneeded clothing. On the

other hand, you run the risk of being defrauded personally for example the individual could misappropriate the funds given or they could be exaggerating their need for the item or good. Another way to help and use the wealth which God has given us is to donate it to a larger group, a charity of some kind. One of the biggest benefits of this is that pools together money and enables a great purchasing power. Money in larger sums has a force multiple that makes a food pantry buying 100\$ worth of groceries end up with more food at the end than 10 people buying 10\$ each. Though while the money typically has a greater output per dollar there's some money always lost in the turn of gears that's just intrinsic to any group. Also, typically it will take longer to see the fruit of the alms since it has to be processed by the group before reaching its intended audience. The simplest way to spend your wealth in a Godly and eternal manner is to simply be charitable to one another. Give freely without counting up debts in your heart. We ought to give and give and give just as Christ gave and gave and gave even up to giving His life for us. Live with an attitude that shows you understand that we truly own nothing. All of our material blessings and comforts come from God, and we belong entirely to Christ. In that sense we're the unjust steward who selfishly spends another's balance as if it were our own. God gives to us to spend on our brothers and sisters, but we ignore them to indulge in ourselves. But that's why God has given us these warning and these wise words, so we can refocus and help one another out.

In closing I would like to make one thing clear. I know I only touched on the surface of the issue of poverty and of income inequality, but they're major issues which affect an almost innumerable amount of people in our country and across the world. As Christians who are still in the world, though not of the world, we have to deal with things like this. As I hope I made clear, God wants us to strive to help those that we can. It's unacceptable to turn a blind eye to it simply because we have things "good enough." The Christian life is one of self-sacrifice and of love. Living at all times to build up and strengthen, knowing that the person you're helping today could very well help you tomorrow. But being such a manifold issue, there are no easy answers. There is no one stop solution to prevent anyone from ever going poor or hungry ever again. There are specific solutions to specific issues in specific contexts. What works in Lindenhurst may not work in South Chicago. What worked here today, may not work here tomorrow. We have to be pragmatic and vigilant when trying to provide for our brothers and sisters. We can't afford to get bogged down in petty and worldly arguments about political parties or ideologies. Remember that we are Christians first and foremost, and if in Christ, Paul says, there's neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, nor female nor male, then I promise that in Christ Jesus there is neither Democrat nor Republican. Every ounce of energy wasted on witch hunting political boogeymen is another day of starvation for someone, it's another day of enduring the elements without a roof, another day of waiting for a united and effective church to come bringing the fruit of the spirit to them. And so, for the sake of Christ, work in brotherly love and patience with each other to help those in need and to glorify God. Amen, and Amen.