

Him " who was born King of the Jews." But we doubt not that they saw in the Child Jesus more than the King of the Jews. At any rate, if they did not, we do; and pay our Christmas homage to the Infant of days who is at the same time Immanuel, God with us : to Whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory for ever!

STEWARDSHIP : FOR THE LORD.*



“ 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.”—LUKE xvi. 9-10.

THESE two sayings of our Lord place our use of this world's goods under different aspects. One makes us stewards administering what is another's property and responsible for the discharge of a trust. The other makes us masters for a season of what earthly substance we have, to turn it to our own account and reap our own advantage from it. The one recommends to us the wisdom of strict fidelity in stewardship pure and simple ; the other recommends to us the wisdom of extracting all the good we can for ourselves from what passes through our hands. In merely human relations it is hard to reconcile these two ideas. A steward, wise for his lord, it wise also for himself so far as he may win his lord's confidence and attain to higher trust ; he cannot, however, at one and the same time seek his master's interest and his own. But, in our relations to Him who is Lord of all, the two ideas are perfectly blended and eternally one. Their combination is the true philosophy of Christian

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life. This is the key to the interpretation of this wonderful chapter. It harmonizes the two parables which begin and end; explains the difficulties of both, especially of the first; and is the secret of the solemn sentences of profound truth which are the link between them. Let us make this combination our subject. And may the great Teacher of earthly and heavenly wisdom help us by His Spirit to discern His meaning; giving us grace to determine at all costs to make His lessons the rule of our life, for His sake as well as for our own.

The principle that we hold all that we have as stewards occupies a large place in our Lord's teaching; but the relation of this principle to our earthly possessions as such is brought out more distinctly in this chapter than anywhere else. Indeed, the bearing of it is so abundantly exhibited that we may regard this portion of the gospel as a complete system of the ethics of property, needing but little illustration from other sources. But the sentences of the Master require pondering, careful pondering, in themselves and in their connection.

I.

The first and broadest application of the principle is one that underlies the whole, but is not formally expressed. It is this, that we hold all that we have—ourselves and whatever we call ours, our bodies and souls, our time and talents and substance, all that makes up the sum of our being and possession—as the redeemed subjects and servants of Christ. It is essential to the idea of stewardship that what

the steward has he counts not his own : as steward he has literally nothing. It is, in the words of Christ, another's. And that other is our Lord Himself, though He does not here tell us that. We are not our own, for we are bought with a price. He found us ruined, disgraced, and apart from His grace hopeless : in the condition of the steward whom He describes in the parable, who had wasted his lord's goods, hears the fearful summons " Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou mayest be no longer steward," and cries in the consciousness that there is no reparation possible, " What shall I do ? " At this point we must leave the parable for a season, and let the Lord give His own answer. There was no possibility of our restoration to our trust : the law broken knows no mercy. Nothing is said of regaining the forfeited stewardship. The holy justice of eternal law cannot give us back our rights. " My lord taketh away from me the stewardship," said the steward in his guilt ; and that is the voice of human nature despairing of any hope from law as such. But the blessed Mediator, not found in this parable even as He is not seen in that of the Prodigal Son, takes all the accounts which testify against us, pays them all, and nails them to His cross, and sets us free. Not, however, to be stewards in the same sense as before. He makes us His own property ; receives the consecration of our gratitude ; gives us back all that we have that we may be His stewards in the economy of grace. Now here, brethren, is the secret of the Christian stewardship. You and all that you have are restored to yourself ; you have not a debt of the

past unpaid ; but you hold all for Christ henceforth. Your absolute all is His. You do not understand the gospel, you cannot call Jesus Lord with true devotion, until you enter into this secret. Until you do there can be no peace between you and Him. "Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that He hath, he cannot be My disciple." But here we have to do with your possessions, and with the power to get possessions : all must come under the same law. You must give all for All. He will have no divided stewardship. Let me beseech you to make this plain to your judgment, and open your heart to receive it, before we proceed. Cast your mind over the whole sum of your earthly endowments, and silently say in your fervent purpose, "Have patience with me and I will pay Thee all !" Nay, tax not His patience : give Him all at once, and open this day a new reckoning with Him. Remember that He says : "Give an account of thy stewardship as a creature, to be a better steward as a creature redeemed."

II.

This last word suggests at once the next application of the principle. What are the tokens of good stewardship ? First, that the entrusted property be improved to the utmost ; secondly, that it be administered strictly according to the owner's will ; and, thirdly, that, where his will is not certainly known, wisdom or prudence does the very best. Now, here we see what the Lord our Master expects from us His consecrated stewards.

The charge, the just charge, against the un-

faithful trustee in the parable was that he had wasted his lord's goods : that he had recklessly squandered them or negligently allowed them to be dissipated. He wastes the property of his master who does not improve it to the utmost. We cannot help remembering the calm answer of the "austere man : " "Wherefore didst thou not put my money into the bank that, at my coming, I might have received mine own with usury ?" Whatever the Scripture says elsewhere against usury, the principle serves the Saviour's purpose here ; and it may be said that in these words we have the sanctification of the increase of property. We are stewards, not only of the substance we possess, but of the "power to get wealth ;" and the more we acquire as stewards the better for our Master's interests. He also makes to Himself "friends of the Mammon of unrighteousness:" through the loyal thrift of His people He increases His own portion of the wealth of this world, and consecrates it to Himself. In fact, in this way He removes the unrighteousness of Mammon ; and is gradually, though alas very slowly, hallowing the commerce of the world. Among the Saviour's most important agents in the preparations of His kingdom upon earth are those merchant-stewards who are carrying this high principle of fidelity into the market-places and exchanges where wealth is honestly gotten. Let this enter into your estimate of your stewardship : as in spiritual things, so also in things temporal, the Lord expects that the ten talents, the five, and the one, be increased for Him. As in a spiritual so also in a temporal sense, the prophecy is to be fulfilled con-

cerning the bringing gold and silver plenteously to Him. It is your wisdom to grow as rich as you can for His sake ; and it is your fidelity. We are bound to maintain our bodies in health, and improve our minds to the utmost, for His use. So also we are bound to remain at our post in the commercial world as long as we can do so to His advantage.

All this implies a high and refined estimate of our steward relation. We may easily deceive ourselves and think that we are accumulating for Him when we are really "heaping up riches" for ourselves. Our safeguard lies in remembering that the idea of stewardship includes—according to the new and evangelical idea of it includes—that of trusteeship for various objects specified in our Saviour's instructions. A steward generally knows his lord's mind as to the administration of his estate : if that lord be absent he has left the record of his wishes, if he be present he can be consulted. Our Lord is both absent and present. He has gone "to a far country for a long season ;" but we have the record of His instructions, written as it were with His own hand. And He is present with us, to be consulted by prayer ; with the full assurance that His Spirit will teach us His mind. We can never be reckoned among those of whom He said : "That servant that knew not the Lord's will shall be beaten with few stripes." At least that tolerant clause has its application in a limited number of cases, and even to them must be very cautiously applied. There may be some whose inveterate invincible ignorance, the result of early training in a wrong school of commercial ethics, fails to see what is written in clear and distinct letters

throughout the New Testament. They seem to us to be laying up riches for themselves, and the proportion of what they give their Lord at the end of the year seems to be a satire on the idea of stewardship. But they plead for their principle—be it the tenth or what it may—and honestly plead. They must be left with their Master. Meanwhile, the stricter Christian takes the New Testament as the code of his instructions. He sees there that he is not only a steward generally, but that he is also a trustee, in company with a large number besides, for many special legatees of our Lord's will. He finds that the poor have a large place : that almsgiving to them is placed almost at the head of the practical graces, and fidelity in the execution of this part of the trust is actually made to turn the issues of the judgment. So important is this, that in some special instances of danger, the Saviour said, "Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor," as if that was the only way to retrieve the robbery of the past. But now He says, "Buy and sell and get gain that ye may have to give to the poor." My rich brethren, do you not see in every part of the gospels that you are a trustee for God's poor? You know how they live and how you live : are you faithful? We have in trust certain property for Him and His kingdom : that is to say, for the spiritually poor as well as the poor of this world. Does it require proof that, as in the Old Testament so in the New, the whole economy of the church and its missions manifold is to be kept up by His stewards, furnished with substance to that end? Here our wisdom is wanted to read and interpret the words of the instruction.

For, after all, much is left to our own discretion ; and we should miss an important point in the Lord's teaching if we omit to observe that He is inculcating the practical wisdom of stewardship for another's interests. In earthly relations every steward is more or less dependent on his own sagacity : his value, and his fidelity too, in that capacity being according to the measure of his honest thoughtfulness. There is a sense in which the unjust agent in the parable was a prudent and thrifty steward : his lord commended him because he had done wisely, cunningly, and thoughtfully. But it was not for his lord : he was a faithful steward of his true master, himself. And our Lord silently says : Be wise for ME as he was for himself. This is of the very essence of our trust, that the Master leaves much, very much, to our tact still. We can have no doubt as to the main outlines of His will : the details we must fill up for ourselves. Here, brethren, comes in the very pith of our Lord's teaching. We are trusted with property that belongs to Him ; which still is so entirely made over to us that we call it our property, our substance, our possessions. And by our use of it He tests, not only our fidelity, but our worthiness to be trusted with more. In nothing is Christian wisdom more needed than in the right employment of our wealth, be it greater or less. How many there are who would think it a great relief if their Lord would only tell them exactly how much He expects, and precisely when or where the offering is to be made. But He is not now, any more than when upon earth, a judge or a divider. He simply says

“All that you have is Mine, and use it well.” He is not a divider, though He must needs be a judge. One thing He says on this very subject: “The light of the body is the eye; if thine eye be single thy whole body shall be full of light.” Let the steward feeling be well educated and keen; and there will be no error: at least, no error against Christ.

III.

Turning to another aspect of the matter, he who habitually remembers his stewardship will be saved from the deadly evil which besets the possession of property, the making it into a god. It may be questioned whether our Lord's words refer to any supposed god of wealth known by the name of Mammon; but it is certain that He here makes it the possible rival of the Supreme. And it is His intention to teach us that our wisdom as stewards must guard us against the danger to which our trust exposes us. There are many arguments against the undue love of this world's good; but here the stress is laid on its being inconsistent with the single-minded fidelity of the steward sentiment. Nor is there any stronger argument than this as it is here employed by our Master.

This virtue, diligently guarded and cherished, will keep the heart from that secret love of money which is idolatry. It is remarkable that when the gospel addresses men who had been turned from external idols, and who no longer needed to be warned against entering the temples of false gods, it still keeps the term to denote that root of all evil,

covetousness. What may be said of every immoderate desire may be and is said of this pre-eminently, that it cannot coexist with the worship of God. "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon:" that is a general principle; its particular application is, "He will hate the one and love the other, for no man can serve two masters." Here for a moment the steward idea is lost sight of, and the man is regarded as capable of only one supreme love. If he hates the thought of giving his heart's best affection to this world and its riches he will supremely love God; if he does not love God supremely, he will most assuredly give his heart to this world's good, and hate God. He who knows what is in man declares that this is the alternative, and that there is no middle course. Against this tremendous danger the safeguard here is the habitual remembrance that what we have is not our own, and that our use of it is simply the test of our fidelity. In the sermon on the mount the safeguard is the remembrance that our true treasure is in heaven, and that where our treasure is our heart must be. To this we shall return hereafter. Meanwhile the great preservative here is faithfulness to the one Master whose stewards and servants we are. Our Lord changes the word at the close, with the express purpose of solemnly warning His disciples, His rich disciples especially. The word "serve" is one that covers the two ideas of stewardship and slavery. And we see the full force of the warning when we unite the two meanings in that sentence which here closes all. "Ye cannot serve God as His trusted stewards and be a slave to Mammon at the same time." Or, in other terms,

the awful danger is thus made emphatic: "The faithful steward-service will alone protect you from becoming idolaters of this world's good." Or, still stronger: "Either use all for God as a Master, or it will take away God from you altogether." It comes to this at last: we must be worshippers in one temple or the other. Man must have a supreme object for his affection: that is the dignity of his nature. If he is not found in the temple where every one speaks of His glory, he will be found in that pantheon where many false gods are worshipped: their names being manifold, the world, or self, or pleasure, or Mammon. Here our idolatry is of Mammon only, for that is the specified subject of warning. And nothing can be more solemn than the thought that he who serves not God with his money makes money itself his only god.

It has been said that the Lord allows no middle course; but He does not intimate that His servant becomes by one act or without intermediate transition a slave of Mammon. We know that there is such a thing as a midway state, in which the possessor of growing wealth is halting between two masters. He has not become a confirmed worshipper in the temple of Mammon: when he is found there, he says, "The Lord pardon thy servant in this thing." He has not renounced the vision and hope of his better days; and such is the warmth of his devotional feeling on some occasions that this world for a time loses its charm. He is a mystery to many around him, and not less so to himself. Things go on long before the secret is found out. But there are testing times which dispel all doubt. I do not mean the

great detector death, or sorrows that are its fore-runners; but such strong appeals as are constantly occurring in life, and when they occur seem to say, "If the Lord be God, serve Him; if Mammon then serve him." To these our Master refers when He says: "He will hold to the one and despise the other." Undoubtedly this points to that secret posture of heart which the unfaithful steward perpetually detects in himself: the preferring of self and alas the disposing or undervaluing of his true Master. When the test is applied, that is found out and seen and known of all men. I may say that the test is applied on the present occasion, throughout our whole community. May we not be found wanting!

Let us all, brethren, receive the Lord's warning with solemn fear: remembering that this is only one of many instances in which He impresses on His people the deadly danger of loving this world's good. His people, I say: the warning is not addressed to the rich alone. We all are stewards of this common Lord; and every one has his measure of trust differing according to a law which seems to govern all the divine dispensations to the creature. The warning applies specially to the rich, no doubt; for in the time of our Saviour the vice of covetousness seems to have deeply infected the heart of society. We have here an incidental confirmation of this; for the evangelist notes what must have been at the time a very marked circumstance, that the Pharisees who were covetous derided the Speaker. They mocked him, because known to be poor he condemned what Providence denied him; or because he exaggerated the principles of stewardship, and in such a way as

to undermine the foundations of personal property. But I should not refer to them, save for the sake of impressing the strong words used by the Redeemer when He was thus scorned. They are such as all rich men ought to remember. "God knoweth the heart: you may appeal to Him for your justification, happy indeed if you can do so; if you cannot, remember that He sees and condemns and will punish your secret idolatry. The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence: if all men must by mighty effort press into the kingdom, much more must you!" But the warning is to all: though the covetous were offended, all heard it. Every one has some property, and therefore some stewardship: all have not the larger talents, whether of influence, or ability, or intellect, or gold; but all have the one talent, which in another parable becomes the one pound, and each must occupy with that till He come. Take care, you who are comparatively needy, that you do not condemn the rich and forget that you may be in the same condemnation. You too may be in some poor corner of the great temple worshipping Mammon at an altar built of wood and stubble, each of you as perfect an idolater as Dives himself.

IV.

Over all that has been said there has been thrown the shadow of the coming judgment. The shadow, I say: for that seems the instinctive thought when the great day is brought to mind. Although it has no necessary shadow for us, the general strain of the Scripture bids all alike prepare for it with deep

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solicitude. We shall see by-and-by how the great day may be made the day of our supreme enrichment : now we must mark the stern solemnity of the Lord's words as they most affectingly warn us of our coming account.

We cannot doubt that it is the last day which is in our text. Our Saviour does not say so ; because much of the meaning as we have seen referred to this life, and also because the very instinct of every heart knows what He points to. Were there any doubt the final parable would solve it. But there can be none : the unanimous consent of mankind has heard in the question, "What do I hear ? Give an account of thy stewardship ; for thou mayest be no longer steward" a remembrancer of that one last audit to which we are all hastening. We understand it full well. While we are called every day to settle our account with our Lord, there is one great reckoning which will decide finally. To that we are all moving onward, in one steady procession for ever. Our Lord is gone for a long time to a far country ; and He does not let us know the exact time of His coming : testifying this only that all His innumerable stewards shall one day be summoned to His presence, bringing their books with them. One of the last sayings of the Risen Lord was : "I come quickly, and My retribution is with Me, to give to every man according as his work shall be." But the same He had said upon earth in every parable speaking of these things.

Here an objection may naturally arise. Is it then to be understood that our Teacher, who is our future Judge, would have us live in the expectation of a judgment that shall proceed strictly according to

our works? There is a certain difficulty in this that is far better solved in practice than by any argument even the most subtle or careful. The Scripture generally speaks of two ruling principles of the future judgment: according to the one, we shall be accepted or rejected on the evidence of our faith in Christ or our rejection of Him; according to the other, which is much more abundantly dwelt upon, we shall be judged by the evidence of the deeds which that faith or unbelief produced. It may be said that the former judgment will decide the mere salvation of the sinner: he who is found in death the possessor of a penitent and living trust in the Redeemer's satisfaction for his debt shall not be held accountable for it at the final bar. This is a most gracious doctrine; but it is one liable to great abuse; and it is always guarded by another, that the kind of salvation, the measure of it, and the degree of future reward assigned hereafter, will be regulated by the faithfulness of the life in all its boundless variety of works. We have nothing to do with such questions here. It is only necessary for us to receive the Lord's words and take care that we do not trifle with them. He is speaking to His disciples and teaching them to be faithful in the use of what they call their "property," their own peculiar possession; and His argument is that if they are unjust in this life, He will not trust them in the next. To His name, both then and now, be the glory. Amen.