

STEWARDSHIP: FOR SELF.

“ 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 xvi. 11-12.

HITHERTO we have been thinking only of our stewardship: not forgetting altogether our own advantage subserved by fidelity, we have dwelt mainly on the fidelity itself. It might seem as if our Lord dwells on this almost exclusively; but a closer examination of the scope of the chapter will show that His lesson wonderfully combines the two ideas, our duty to our Master in the care of what is His, and our prudent investment of it for our own interest as if it were our own. In fact, we can hardly fail to see that this latter point is really uppermost: from the first word, “ Make to yourselves friends out of this unrighteous Mammon,” down to the last, “ How shall I give you that which is your own ? ”—for that is what it means—there is a quiet undertone of reference to the true wisdom of life, of probationary life, that of extracting as much good as possible from all the elements of its evil, especially from what we call its riches or possessions.

I.

Extracting it for self; and not only for the Master. It might appear from some parts of

Scripture that the thought of self, and any advantage to self, must be entirely eradicated from a perfect religion. But that is far from being the lesson of our chapter. There is a sense indeed in which self—that is, self as a final end—must be utterly suppressed: he who seeks himself finally in his whole life will most certainly lose himself. Again self must be suppressed as the ruling director of life: we must surrender up the control of our whole being to the Lord and His Spirit with as entire a relinquishment of self-jurisdiction as if the personal I were absorbed into the Holy Ghost. But, on the other hand, it is the will of God that the benefit of self—of this individual one that shall never melt into another, nor be lost in the universe, nor sink into God Himself—shall as subordinate never be lost sight of. It will presently be shown that the whole of Scripture identifies the interest of our Master with our own interest in a manner for which no earthly stewardship furnishes a strict parallel. But, before doing so, we must receive the full impression of what our Lord here teaches: that the whole wisdom of life is in a certain sense a thrifty ever-watchful study of our own interests. There is a Christian care for self, and for self above all things, which is at once the supremest wisdom and the supremest unselfishness. Christianity does not reverse the order of nature which make the care of self a primary instinct. It sanctifies and ennobles it by making it one with devotion to our neighbours and supreme devotion to God. Mark the unjust steward in relation to this. He is sketched by the Divine Master of parables as a

perfect devotee or slave of self: one, in fact, who sacrificed everything to that idol. Self wasted the goods of his master; and when he is detected, his only thought is to save himself: not "how may I retrieve my lord's loss," but "how may I at his further expense obtain a home when he dismisses me." Mark how prudent the fear of ruin has made him. He ponders, and disdains to despair or even despond. He forms his decision, and studies how to extricate himself and turn the danger even to good account. And he quickly acts on the decision. There the parallel ends. But so far it holds perfectly. We must think, decide and act in the midst of the dangers of time, and the snares of earthly wealth, for the interest of our immortal souls when time and the wealth of time are ended and gone.

II.

For this is the true secret, already hinted at, that we have no self apart from Him. Here, brethren, is the glory of our religion, that the heavenly estate for which we are stewards is Christ's and ours in common. We never reach the height of our Lord's teaching, nor rise to the grandeur of our relation to Him, until we so identify ourselves with Him and His universal cause on earth that we know no difference between His and ours. "He that is joined unto the Lord is one Spirit:" this means that the Spirit of the incarnate Saviour of the world animates the disciple even as He animates the Lord Himself. And I may dare to add: "He that is joined to the

Lord is one body:" the corporate work of Christ upon earth is common to the Head and the members. What but this did Jesus mean when He said to the disciples whom He was about to leave: "Henceforth I call you not servants or stewards only; for a servant knoweth not His Lord's will with that intimacy and unreserve with which I tell you all My mind; but I have called you friends, for all the purposes committed to Me of the Father I have made known unto you." This was not said to the apostles only: it was spoken to us all. And it is the true evangelical glorification of the steward principle. It is a good thing to have the spirit of strict honesty in giving to every cause of charity or benevolence what we know the true Owner demands, and not rob God because He is absent or unseen; but it is still better to have an intense personal interest in every cause, and, as St. Paul says, "naturally" care for it: not pressed by duty from without, but urged by an instinct natural from within. In this sense also we must make to ourselves friends and not merely clients of all objects of our bounty.

Now let us observe the combination of stewardship and independent possession in another light: the spiritual benefit we ourselves receive from the faithful administration of our Lord's goods. This is literally an inexhaustible subject, and one rather for your meditation than for my discourse. But a few hints may be of use for the guidance of meditation. And first it must be remembered that the Lord is not speaking exclusively of the other world when He says, "If ye be not faithful in that which is

another man's who shall give you that which is your own?" The stewardship of uncertain and unrighteous Mammon is closely bound up with the possession in the present life of our own and of the true riches. And what, brethren, are the true riches? Surely they are not reserved for eternity: they may be accumulated in time and treasured up in the spirit of man itself. Your own heart is the treasure-house, where you may lay up much goods for many years, for years that never will be counted out. These riches are acquired by the discreet use of everything about us. But here we have to do with the prudent administration of this world's possessions. And, generally speaking, we are truly rich if we are "rich towards God;" if we so live as to secure His constant approbation. Is there any wealth comparable to the light of His countenance, the blessed sense of His favour encircling the soul like a cloud of glory from which issues the voice, "This is My beloved son in whom I am well pleased?" And is not that secured by the man who ever imitates that Supreme Son of God's love Who though He was rich, made Himself poor, and left us His example of habitual self-sacrificing charity? Surely our wealth is a price of inestimable value put into our hands to buy this favour with if we only have a heart to it. It was Jesus Himself who said that word which, floating long unrecorded in the atmosphere of Christendom, was made permanent by St. Paul, "It is more blessed to give than to receive:" whatever else that profound word may mean, it tells us how we may constantly be increasing our store of blessedness; and surely blessedness is the highest term for the true

riches. Every act of pure charity done in the spirit of Christ—done by a poor man in his poverty as well as by the rich in his wealth—secretly and surely adds to the capital of the soul's true substance. And let me add that if the spirit of self-sacrifice enters into the charity, and in the proportion in which it enters, the true wealth of the giver is increased. The richest soul in the sight of God—whether among the great or among the lowly—is he whose heart is emptied of self and dwelling in charity dwells in God. This priceless grace may be disciplined in many ways besides the everlasting outgoing of benevolence; but the liberal use of wealth is one of the surest aids to its attainment. Time would fail us to tell of the many ways in which Christian bounty helps towards the enrichment of the soul. It disciplines self-denial; cherishes the habit of active piety; and, as opportunities and occasions of practical benevolence crowd the whole of life, it makes religion a constant reality. But, above all, it affords a perpetual opportunity of cultivating that spirituality of mind, deadness to the world, and dependence on the Supreme Good, which is essentially bound up with the true riches of the soul. He is truly and eternally rich who is poor in spirit, delivered from the slightest residue of the earthly mind, and satisfied in God as his portion. Now I do not say that this most happy experience can be bought by the expenditure of the wealth which bears on it the superscription of this world; or that the affluent man has more means for its attainment than the needy man. But it is very certain that the more we have of earthly goods the more are our

graces tested ; and, if we are wise enough to sustain the test, the more confirmed becomes our renunciation of this world and our preference of heaven. Let the "poor of this world, rich in faith" have all honour : their contented resignation to the Hand that denies them wealth is precious in the sight of God, and theirs is the kingdom of heaven. But blessed also is the rich man who trusts not in uncertain riches, satisfies not his soul with the Mammon of unrighteousness, and makes his possession of temporal good only the means of securing eternal riches. Now this, brethren, is our Lord's meaning here. The wisdom of a man who has this dangerous trust is not only to keep himself from the special peril that besets him ; but to turn the danger to good account. The unjust steward translated all the elements of peril that stared him in the face into ministers of advantage : like another worldling sketched by a human artist, "out of the nettle danger he plucked the flower safety." You are in danger : you must defy the danger, and press it to advantage. That is the lesson of the chapter, and of our whole life.

III.

But, after all, we must go beyond the present world for the Saviour's most impressive illustration of His meaning. We cannot disconnect the stewardship of time from the issues of eternity. All that we possess is ours for a season, that through our prudent use of it we may advance our own interest for ever. In two ways does our Heavenly Teacher impress this on us : first, we may make to ourselves friends of the

Mammon of unrighteousness who shall welcome us to everlasting habitations; secondly, by fidelity below in that which is least we may prepare ourselves for larger trust, and for a jurisdiction hereafter for which the stewardship of time furnishes but a slight analogy. Both these require careful consideration.

There can be no doubt that our Lord here exhorts us so to use our earthly substance that we may reap advantage from it eternally. The words are very explicit: more explicit they could not be. The lord of the unjust steward commended his servant's craft though he himself suffered by it. That steward had simply used his opportunity, while the bills were still in his hands, to buy with them a refuge in his disgrace. "I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed!" he said; but he did dig in the soil of his deep cunning, and he did beg though not as a mendicant. He called the debtors, and, considering the character of each, lowered their debts by various proportions, and so secured their help when his distress should come. We must not criticize the plan; nor consider how shortsighted such nefarious tampering with accounts sometimes proves. The Saviour indicates all that when He says, "The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." What they are in respect to the eternity that is coming, let the final parable say. There, lifting up his eyes in torments, is the unjust steward under another character. Our heavenly Teacher hastens to speak for Himself: "and I say unto you!" And what does this emphatic preface introduce but the lesson that we must in our better and holier cunning create for ourselves friends by the charitable

use of our substance. What that worldling did for the poor self of this generation, you must do for the higher and nobler self of the world to come. We are not told that the unrighteous Mammon, being mixed up with so much iniquity, must be utterly renounced. But we are told that we must make such friends with it as will receive us into everlasting habitations. Let us not distract our minds by curiously inquiring how the figure may become a reality: we understand that our works will follow us, let us believe also that they may precede us; that the objects of our self-sacrificing bounty will, if not in their own person yet in the Person of their lord and ours, welcome us to our reward. You may, brethren, make for yourselves legions of friends by liberality to the poor, by helping the distressed, and by sending the gospel to the heathen at home and abroad. The Lord Himself represents them all, and further represents His own general cause in the world: He is really the Friend whom you may enlist in your behalf by your gifts. You will not want more than one habitation, your own for ever and ever; but its largeness and beauty and adornment and blessedness and nearness to Him will depend upon these many friends you make. Think then of your money as having this possibility in it. "Whilst it is in your own power," see that you use it well; before the time come when you may wish in vain that you had your income again at your command.

But that is not all. The tone of the whole lesson taught by our Lord is this, that our stewardship in this world may be so administered as to prepare us for larger trust hereafter. The unjust steward does

not, indeed, teach us that, save by contrast. He so failed that he could never be trusted again; and in this, as in other things, he is merely a text on which the Lord preaches His own independent discourse. And that discourse is here of the most profound importance. We are to be trusted hereafter according to the measure of our capacity for trust acquired here. Again, I say, let us not perplex our minds by subtle inquiries: let us take the plain words as they are delivered to us. "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much:" that is, towards God. "He that is unjust in that which is least is unjust also in much:" that is towards man. When read in the light of the parables concerning the talents and the pounds, this tells us that there will be stewardships in the other world, without probation and without fear of failure, proportioned and accommodated to the character we have acquired here. The highest possible trust, of the largest wealth and most abundant increase, is but little, indeed, in comparison of the great trust hereafter: "that which is least." But fidelity in that prepares for fidelity in administrations which it hath not entered the heart of man to conceive. Two things are here impressively hinted, rather than unfolded, by our Lord: one is that the general principle of fidelity is to be trained in this life; and the other that this prepares for independence. The right use of money is but one element. The turn given by our Lord to the words shows that He speaks not to the holders of property only but to all. "That which is least" has the widest possible application. It invests the very slightest trust with unspeakable

importance, and carries the high grace of faithfulness into every nook and corner of life. In the sight of God there is no relation of great and small : He sees the character in what we call little things, and accepts the smallest act of honest service with the same complacency that rewards the service of an arch-angel. But it is the second point with which we must close, as most fully illustrating the combination we have all along had in view. We are not merely serving our absent Master by rightly employing our substance, we are also preparing for a stewardship which is real independence : independence, that is, so far as there will be no probation, no calling to account, no judgment connected with it. We shall be stewards still, inasmuch as all the employments of the kingdom of heaven will be in the service of our Lord, Who is the Son over the whole house in heaven and in earth. But we shall have "our own," the "true riches," in "everlasting habitations." It is our wisdom, brethren, to keep this evermore in view : to make the innumerable little things which count up the sum of daily life a perpetual discipline for the formation of our character ; and practice ourselves by fidelity in that which is least for trust in that which is great. Thus shall we be faithful to our Lord and wise for ourselves in everything : the lesson of our text.

Let us, brethren, in conclusion, mark the one final end of our Saviour's teaching. He is evidently drawing a comparison between His own people and the people of the world : that comparison being twofold. His disciples are supposed to have chosen the good part, eternal and true riches, the everlasting habitations of heaven, and the service of

the one only Master who can reward for ever: they are "children of light." And, as to their choice and ultimate aim, they are wiser than the "children of this world," who limit their aim to the present generation, renounce eternity, and live only to enrich and pamper self. The comparison is here all in our favour: we who serve Christ are the only wise, and the others are utterly foolish: indeed, once only did our Lord use the strong expression "Thou fool!" and it was about one of them. But then the comparison takes another turn. Supposing them wiser in their final choice—ininitely wiser—our Lord mourns over them as being less prudent than the worldling in the methods they adopt to secure their end. And here comes in the exhortation or warning with which we have been occupied. Receive it, fellow children of light! Confirm this day in His name your wise choice for eternity. Purpose this day to be wise also in the prudent ordering of all the devices of life to secure it: that this wisdom may dwell with prudence in your heart and in your conduct. And that prudence is nothing more and nothing less than this, that in the employment of every talent you possess, that of earthly substance included, you keep your Master's interest in view and in so doing secure your own. To Him be glory for ever. Amen.