

## “God or Mammon” – Kent Dunnington

Matthew 6:24-34

On Thursday I went to St. Louis to have lunch with an acquaintance of mine who is a professor at SLU. On the way in, I wondered to myself if this person would buy my lunch. My thinking on the matter went like this. “He teaches at SLU, which means he makes twice the money I do for teaching half the classes. This guy owes me lunch.” When we met up at the coffee shop, however, things got a little awkward. There we were both standing in front of the register looking at the menu. I had long since decided what I wanted to eat, but I was unsure how to proceed. If I step up, order and pay for my lunch, then I rob this man of the opportunity to buy my lunch, plus I make it very clear that I do not intend to pay for his—a jerk move. But if I step up and order and then motion him to order as well, I have in effect committed myself to buying his lunch, compounding the injustice of our financial disparity. So I waited for him to make the first move. Apparently, he was performing a similar kind of analysis because we both stood there for a really long time. Finally, he said, “Do you know what you want?” It was a brilliant move. I said yes, and he gestured me to go ahead, as if generously. Pure genius. He wins. That’s why he makes twice as much money as me.

This is an embarrassing story, because it reveals how small I am. But I am sure that it has happened to everyone here at some point, so get off your high horse. Although it is not the only one, money is the most common source of anxiety for each of us. Hardly a day passes that each of us is not made anxious in some way by money. And that is why our gospel reading for today is so troubling. It states in no uncertain terms that anxiety about money is a symptom of idolatry—that when we are worried about money it shows that we basically do not believe in God.

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” I wish Jesus would have left the matter right there. If he had, I think we could escape unscathed, for we could take advantage of a long tradition of evading Jesus’ words about material possessions by spiritualizing them. According to that tradition, Jesus was not really concerned about external behavior but rather about an internal attitude. Jesus wasn’t concerned that we actually give our things away, but only that we be willing to do so if God called us to—and thankfully not many are called to this extreme way. Jesus wasn’t concerned that we actually limit our acquisitiveness, but only that we value God more than money. Jesus wasn’t concerned that we actually become poor, but only that we become poor in spirit.

What’s great about this approach is that it’s so hard to know who we really are, on the inside. And therefore it’s pretty easy to confirm for ourselves that we really do love God more than

money—we just turn our gaze inward and we can see it right there! We sometimes talk as though our own motivations and internal dispositions are transparent to ourselves in just this sort of way, even if they are opaque to others. But more often than not, this is not true. Your friends often know much better than you do what you're really like.

Words like “love” and “faith” and “worship” and “value” are so vague—how can you know if they apply to you? Flannery O'Connor used to say that she avoided using the word “love,” preferring instead to always use it in its concrete senses, like “almsgiving, visiting the sick and burying the dead and so forth.” This is the problem with the internalized, spiritualized approach—how would you know, just by turning the mind's eye inward, whether you served God or Mammon? It would be so easy to be self-deceived.

Jesus seems to be aware of this problem, because he follows up the imperative to serve God rather than Mammon with a “therefore.” “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” Here, Jesus is saying, is the concrete form that worship takes. If you really trust God, then you will be free of anxiety about your life. If you are full of anxiety about your life, then you are serving Mammon. It's just that simple.

But isn't this just ridiculously naïve? Don't worry about what you will eat, drink, or wear? Does Jesus know who he's talking to? Does he not know that our entire economy practically depends on our inability to avoid anxiety? More seriously, are there not some things that we ought to worry about, such as providing for our families, securing national and international peace, and protecting the earth's precious resources? In a word, no. Try as you might—and many have, including our very own John Wesley in his Standard Sermons—there is no way to get Jesus to sanctify your worries.

So if you are like me and you occasionally find yourself fretting about who's covering the bill at dinner, or worried that you might not get your fair share of the pizza, or anxious that your wife is spending too much of your money, or scheming to see if you can mooch off of others' generosity without acknowledging it—if you just find that when money is at stake you tighten up a little bit—well then, join the crowd. You are among us who worship Mammon instead of God. And I am here to tell you this morning that there is no condemnation for you. Consider it a blessing to be disabused of your self-deception.

Now you know that you are enslaved, and that you are not as free as God would like you to be. Acknowledging your enslavement is the first step to being liberated! And God wants us all to be as free as the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. He has given us one another, in fact, for that express purpose. Just look around. You are surrounded by people whom God has brought into your world so that you may practice being lavish, reckless, and utterly openhanded with the gifts that God has given you. Some of these people are even good enough Christians that they will ask you for money when they need it. And when that happens, you had better get ready:

you're on the verge of living as though you really believe in God! You are liable to make people uncomfortable.

Every time I read this passage, I am reminded of one of my friends in college. His name was Garry, and he was just sort of an oddball in our group. You see, all the guys that I hung around with had grown up in solid, white, middle-class, Protestant families. We all had the Protestant work ethic, we had been taught from a young age how to budget, how to tithe our ten percent, how to delay gratification, never go into debt, and get ahead through hard work and thrift. And then there was Garry. He too had been raised middle-class and Protestant, but something didn't quite click with him. He seemed to never have money, and he was always bumming off one of us. Then, when he did have money, rather than carefully repaying all of his debts, he would just blow it on a meal for a bunch of his friends, or buy a pretty girl some ridiculous gift, or give it all away to a panhandler he met on the street. I was always perplexed by it, and I judged Garry for it. Back then, I considered him irresponsible, shortsighted, extravagant, and imprudent. Now I just think of him as Christian.

Because he was the only one of my friends who could give—I mean really give: give freely, give abundantly, give with no expectation or even hope of return. And he was the only one of my friends who could receive—I mean really receive: ask for help, accept help, celebrate help with no resentment or rush to even the score. Somehow or other, my friend Garry had learned to trust God.

Can we really live this way? Could this be true? Only if God is who he says he is. Either you believe it or you don't. You have to choose. "You cannot serve God and wealth."

"O God, grant that whatever good things we have, we may share generously with those who have not and that whatever good things we do not have, we may request humbly from those who do. Amen" (Aquinas).