

Whenever we study a biblical passage we need to ask ourselves two questions: (1) what did it mean when it was first written and (2) what does it mean today? In other words, before we can be "relevant" and "practical" we have to spend some time dealing with what many people feel are dry and dusty facts of ancient history. So first, let's look at what Jesus meant when he said these words nearly 2000 years ago.

One thing we notice is the strange word, "Mammon." It's not an english word. It's an aramaic word for money and material possessions. For some reason Matthew didn't translate this word from aramaic to greek as he did with most of the sayings of Jesus. Perhaps he left it untranslated because he wanted people to hear the very word that Jesus himself used so often when he talked about money and material possessions. The early church left this word untranslated, according to German scholar Martin Hengel, because they regarded it almost as the name of an idol: the service of mammon is idolatry. Still later, John Milton identified Mammon with one of the angels who fell with Satan from their heavenly estate. At any rate, by leaving this word untranslated in the english versions of the Bible Mammon takes on the character of a person who demands our allegiance and service.

For another thing, Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and Mammon." Jesus took this illustration from the institution of slavery. William Barclay tells us that in the ancient world a slave had no rights, no money, no possessions of his own. Everything belonged to his master and all his needs supplied by him. Nor had a slave any time to call his own. Every moment belonged to his master and was at his master's disposal. Referring to that fact Jesus said that everybody is a slave and, in the final analysis, there are really only two masters: God or material possessions. If God is our master all that we have belongs to him. All our time belongs to him; there is not one moment or one thing we can call our own. On the other hand, if Mammon is our master then the desires for our own material wellbeing will come first in our life. We can be a slave to material things or to God. There is no other alternative according to Jesus.

For another thing, we notice that Jesus was not very moderate in his choice of words. One was either devoted to God or despised him. One either loved him or hated him. One either served God or Mammon. This is typical of the way Jesus taught. He was a radical in many ways. He confronted men and women with a radical choice. He placed

a totalitarian demand upon all who came to him. There was no room for indecision, hesitation, or indifference. For him everything was black and white. There were no shades of gray. It was either God or Mammon. If I could sum up what Jesus meant when he spoke these words it would be (1) we must choose between God and material possessions (2) there is no other alternative, and (3) the choice is not an option.

Now that we have looked at what our text meant originally we can be "relevant". We can apply his word to today's world. To begin with we may be tempted to say that the chasm between the world of Jesus and the world of today is too wide and deep to be bridged and that his word can have no application to the complexities of 20th century life in America. Today, in a world come of age, we say that the choices can't be that simple. We recognise the ambiguities of life. Nothing is black and white anymore. Everything is in a gray area. For example, we say that the answers to the problems of high unemployment, poverty, world hunger, peace, and the high cost of health care are very complicated. There are just no easy answers we say.

But is that so? Aren't the answers to all these problems really quite simple? Is it not the desire for Mammon

that is at the root of war, unemployment, poverty, world hunger, and the high cost of health care? But as long as we tell ourselves everything is so complex we can put off that radical choice God demands of us. We can continue to live comfortably, to acquire more and more things, to hold on to as much as we can, without really ever coming out and admitting that we don't really want to pay the price for solving these problems. We can serve Mammon under the pretext of not really knowing the answers to these complex problems. All this complexity that we imagine is really a smoke screen that covers up the fact that we have already made the choice to serve Mammon rather than God.

But to those who have made the initial choice for God the words of Jesus make things so much simpler. For one thing, in the church decisions will be made with respect to God's word and command and not according to the amount of money we stand to gain or lose by any decision. For example, if there are wealthy members of this church who never attend services of public worship they should be reminded of their membership vows, encouraged to return, and welcomed with open arms if they do. And if they don't they should be removed from the active rolls of the

church and notified of the fact even though they may stop contributing their money to the church. They should be made aware of the radical claims of Christ on their lives as each one of us should who have stood before the congregation and made a solemn pledge to serve Christ as our Lord.

For another thing, there are times when the church must follow the example of Jesus by standing beside and becoming identified with sinners at the risk of losing financial support. There may come a time in the future, if the general mood of the nation reacts against homosexuals by depriving them of their jobs and apartments that the church should stand beside them, as Jesus did with the woman taken in adultery, by exposing the self-righteousness of their accusers, defending their human rights as men and women created in the image of God, while at the same time condemning the sin of homosexual practice. When the church becomes so enslaved to material things and fearful of losing them that she disobeys the commands of God she in reality hates God despite all the stained glass windows and costly sanctuaries.

For another thing, this text should remind us that every day of our lives we must choose again and again be-

tween God and Mammon. It isn't a once for all choice. It's a choice that confronts us every day of our lives. So there may come a time for some of you when you have to choose between working at a particular time or worshipping God with his people. If you put God before Mammon it will mean a sacrifice in terms of money. In some instances it may mean you will be fired. At any rate you will be faced with this clear-cut choice. Will it be God or Mammon?

As vacation time approaches many of us will be faced once again with a choice between God or Mammon. Our Lord's command should remind us that if we are a servant of God there is no time or place we can call our own, not even on vacation. Will you take time to worship regularly when you go on vacation? As the weather becomes nicer some of you will be eager to get out on the golf course or tennis courts. But will you choose to do so in the place of the public worship of God? No man can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and Mammon. When business trips take you away from home on the weekends do you continue to maintain the habit of public worship faithfully wherever you are? You cannot serve God and Mammon.

There are, of course, many other applications of the words of Jesus. For example, these words should come

to mind when we vote. Will we vote for people who promise to increase our own material goods at the expense of others or will we vote for people who want to see the world's food and material resources more equally distributed? In short, the words of Jesus should make us reassess whose servants we are. Are we slaves to our money? Are we slaves to our jobs? Are we slaves to society and its demands? If we are then we are serving Mammon. We are not serving and loving God devotedly.

It's true, not even the best Christian serves God one hundred percent of the time. And each one of us serves Mammon to a greater or lesser degree. But if we are members of Christ's kingdom we cannot be happy serving Mammon. We will be miserable in his service. We enter the kingdom of Christ with the clear understanding that we are willing to allow Christ to conquer in us our love and devotion of Mammon.

The attitude of the Christian, Martin Luther once said, is this: "Here is my wallet and money bag, my house and my home. But here is my Christ. Now, if I have to forsake and surrender one of them, I will let it all go in order to keep my Christ." Christians in Uganda, China, Russia and many parts of South America are faced

with that radical choice. Many have forsaken all to follow Jesus. Is it realistic to think we would do the same if we ~~cannot~~ ^{don't} even tithe, if we cannot even sacrifice a days work or a morning's pleasure to follow Christ as Lord? In the words of Martin Luther again, "It is vain for you to persuade yourself of the idea that you will keep them both as your masters, but you simply have to make up your mind to forsake one of them."

As much as I may dislike what Jesus says here, as much as I would like to moderate his teaching for my own comfort as well as yours, I am not at liberty to do so. His word falls like a thunder-clap, like a sledge-hammer, on my life as it may on yours. His word is like a mirror which reflects and reveals to us how little or how much we love God, are devoted to him, and serve him. His word addresses us all with a radical choice. Either we believe Jesus is Lord and his word is truth or frankly and openly confess that Mammon is our master.

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God And Mammon." Whom will you serve? To whom will you be devoted? Whom will you love, forsaking all others? God or Mammon? If

I have made the choice sound harsh then you misunderstand me. There is no master as harsh as Mammon and his ways lead to Hell. But in the service of God there is perfect freedom, joy, and life everlasting.

Make me a captive Lord,
And then I shall be free.

AMEN.