

Pam. 1689

RELIGION  
AND MONEY

—  
A Message to Business Men  
—

Substance of an Address Delivered at the  
Southern Baptist Convention at Hot  
Springs, in May, 1908

—  
DR. EDWIN M. POTEAT  
—

Home Mission Board  
Atlanta, Georgia  
1908-1909

**J**ESUS said: "It is hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God."

Ruskin said preachers are afraid to preach on this passage, and I recall in connection with it an incident in the life of Heine. At a time when Heine was the most brilliant talker in Europe, he a Jew, was invited by a Christian hostess to a dinner party, in the expectation of his being the life of the company. The dining hall was ablaze with lights and the glitter of cut glass and gold. Heine took his seat at the table, and remained silent till the hostess, determined to arouse him, demanded—"Why so silent?" With a look around the brilliant room, he said—"I was just wondering what you Christians are going to do with the camel question."

The young ruler in the gospel story misjudged himself. He frankly supposed religion was the chief interest of his life. The service which Jesus rendered him was to show him he was mistaken. This he did by putting riches and religion before him and telling him to choose between them: He chose riches!

Our Lord's advice to him—"Sell—and give"

---

---

means this: You get on religiously only if you carry your religion into the field of your predominant interest. If a man's religion is vital it will show itself in the field where he lives his life; there chiefly rather than in some corner, some avocation where he finds himself only occasionally. No amount of religious scrupulosity maintained in the corners and asides of life will make amends for meanness or atheism in a man's main career.

This ruler kept up his prayers, went regularly to the temple, paid his share for public worship and the poor; and in all that negative morality which consists in refraining from certain overt acts of wrong-doing he was blameless, a worthy member of the Jewish nation. Yet he remained unsatisfied, and Jesus pointed out to him the reason; in that large area of his life covered by his property interests he was selfish. He was living under the fallacy that a man could be right with God and mean with his fellows at the same time. "No;" says Jesus, "You want the joy of religion. Very well; you can have it if you will bring your handling of your property under the control of religion." In other words, carry your relations God-ward into the sphere of your relations man-ward and give them the controlling influence there and you will find the heart-rest you crave.

Here is a fine man—a church officer. He teaches a Bible class, prays in public, is a regular contributor to all the enterprises of his church;

---

---

he is prosperous in business, but confesses that the more he has the meaner he feels. That is to say, with all his activity as a Christian worker, he does not go forward in personal goodness, does not grow in grace.

Our Lord's diagnosis of the difficulty in such a case would be this: The man's religion does not get full expression in the field of his predominant interests. He would say: You do not live in the church or Bible school, in Bible reading and commandment keeping. You live in the store, the factory, the bank. Your mind is principally occupied in the management of your property, in the making of money; that is where you live, and there you are selfish—and a man cannot grow in grace while he is growing in selfishness. You will grow in grace, get a victory over self, and so come to fullness of character and to peace, when religion becomes in fact your chief interest and holds in strict subordination all other interests whatsoever.

All which is to say that religion and money cannot be divorced without peril. Religion must be mixed with all of life, and when so mixed the resulting combination is life of the highest quality, that is, eternal life.

Here the question arises, How mix religion and money-making? The answer is simple. Bring the making and the spending of money under the control of the religious motive. Ask

---

---

yourself, Why do I stay in this business? An Illinois man was asked his business—He replied, "I'm a Christian, and I pack pork to pay the expenses." He staid in the business of packing pork because it enabled him to pay the expenses of his work as a Christian, the latter being his main career. If the man who farms for himself and sings for Jesus on Sunday thinks he is a Christian, he has profoundly misunderstood and misinterpreted the religion which he professes. Christianity enjoins and requires the organization and control of the total business life of the community in the service of the Kingdom of God. If anybody thinks such organization and control of business chimerical, impracticable, unwise, let him be reminded that the deepest unfaith is the fear that right cannot be done.

The significance and the promise of the Laymen's Missionary Movement is in the dawning of the conviction in the minds of business men that our main business is to bring in everlasting righteousness; and that there is no wiser investment of money than in those enterprises which seek to build up the Kingdom of God, that is, to bring the actual current life of this world under the reign of the will of God. Business men are taking hold of the evangelization of the world as a business proposition, having perceived that, as Ruskin puts it, "Among national manufactures, that of souls of good quality may at last turn out

---

---

a quite leadingly lucrative one. Nay, in some far-away and yet undreamt of hour I can even imagine that England may cast all thoughts of possessive wealth back to the barbaric nations among whom they first arose, and that . . . . She, as a Christian mother, may at last attain to the virtues and the treasures of a heathen one, and be able to lead forth her SONS, saying—  
‘These are MY JEWELS!’ ”

These lessons of the interview between Jesus and the rich young ruler were never more pertinent than they are today. (1) “What is the matter with me?” said the man. “I’m rich; but I am not satisfied. Peace eludes me. My heart is hungry.” Many among us who have made wealth their aim and are now rich, understand him perfectly. Money cannot buy the permanent satisfactions, cannot satisfy the deeper longings of the human heart. A starving woman lifted up her last crust of bread and said “All this and God!”—and she was rich indeed. In the really great stresses of life money sinks to its proper valuation. When you are racked with pain, facing death, it cannot help much to know that the bedstead is mahogany or hammered brass or gold.

(2) Worth must be estimated in terms of character, that is, of one’s settled preferences, and not in terms of money. How much is he worth? must be interpreted to mean, How much is he worth in usefulness to the community and

---

---

the world? A young woman wrote home from the West that she had married a man worth a million dollars. When the young couple came East the husband took an humble position at a small salary. His wife was asked to explain, and Mary said, "I'd rather marry a man worth a million dollars who didn't have a cent than to marry a man who had a million dollars and wasn't worth a cent."

(3) The love of money grows on money, and will gradually exclude religion, kindness, and finally self interest even. A fairy met a man and offered to give him a purse, explaining that the purse always had a ducat in it. Said she: "I'll give you this purse; if you take the gold piece out another will come in, but you must promise not to spend a penny of the money 'till you are willing to throw the purse away." The man eagerly agreed to accept the purse on the condition named. He took out the first ducat, then a second and then a third, and with a thrill of delight he said, "Magic purse!" And then he filled all his pockets, then he began to pile the gold in a jingling heap about his feet. The pile grew bigger and bigger, and his desire for more grew as his pile grew. He saw he was getting hungry; but no, he could not bear the thought of buying food, for before he could do that he must throw the purse away. The end of the story is that the man starved to death

taking money out of the purse! The place therefore to master money is when you begin to handle it; if not then, the likelihood is, it will master you.

The young ruler did not begin early enough; and when he encountered the straight beam of the eye of Jesus who saw in money a means of social service and nothing more, he winced—shrank—withdraw.

What did he do with his money? The record does not say. He may have hoarded it and become a miser. He may have reinvested it to make more, just for the thrill of success in an enlarging business. He may have wasted it in luxurious living. He may have devised it to his children, endowing them in idleness, forgetting that idleness is a curse, and that work is the first law of progress, material and moral.

But surely he never forgot his meeting with Jesus, who had put before him as a career the investment of his surplus gains in social betterment, in enterprises the benefits of which accrue to all the people, and in particular which aim to bring in the Kingdom of God.

Can a rich man be saved? Yes; but Jesus said, it is by the special grace of God.