



Can You Have Mammon and Serve God? Yes!

GERRY RAFFTERY

Can you have mammon and serve God? The question is raised or implied in a different way in the Sermon on the Mount (“Can you serve God and mammon?”), where the answer is obviously no. Similarly, Jesus’ observation that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25) and the fate of the rich man in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) seem to make the same point. Can you have mammon and serve God? Watch out!

Ah, but the gospel is always full of surprises.

Standard English dictionaries often equate “mammon” with the false god of riches and wealth, wealth and worldly gain, or greed. The scriptural and traditional uses of the word obviously carry with them a more negative weight than a simple definition of money. “Mammon” seems to imply lots of money and, with it, a desire to have more. Those sitting in the pew, hearing the Bible’s cautions about wealth, can quickly draw a distinct line between what they have (seemingly very little) and the greater wealth (mammon) of their neighbor.

So it is important to recognize that the vast majority of us who have access to this article are rich. And because we live in a broken, sinful world, we all have “mammon.” The Global Rich List calculates that if we make \$25,000 a year, we are among the top ten percent of the richest people in the world.¹ Even the poorest of our seminary students would come close to the top ten percent.

Through the eyes of Jesus, the mammon question was never about the quantity of what we have, but always about the quality of what we do, or don’t do, with what we have (the widow’s mite, the Rich Young Ruler, and Zacchaeus are great examples).

Miroslav Volf writes: “Wealth does not make us givers; poverty cannot prevent us from being givers.” Again, “Our relationship to things changes once we truly understand that everything has been given to us by God.” He goes on to say, “God gives us life, powers and abilities, and so we earn and possess. We’ll earn and

¹Globalrichlist.com (accessed 25 February 2010). The site allows you to enter your income and calculate where you are in relation to the wealth of others on the planet.

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Can You Have Mammon and Serve God? Maybe Not?

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If I were to say no to this question, it would be because, in American culture, we live with a warped sense of ownership. When God created humans in God's image and appointed them to be stewards of the earth, God intended that we care for God's creation in the way that we would care for something entrusted to us by our closest friend. But bad things happened in the garden, and it didn't take long for the fine line to be crossed between being entrusted with something and presumed ownership of it. We believe that being entrusted is synonymous with owning. Nowhere in Scripture does God transfer ownership, but there are countless examples of God's empowering the steward to care for God's creation. If my argument is correct, we cannot have mammon or wealth and serve God until we are clear that God is the owner and we are the stewards of the mammon that always continues to belong to God.

Asking ourselves over and over, "Who does the mammon belong to? Why has it been given to us? How do we gain a clearer understanding of having versus owning?" are possible ways for us to gain and retain such clarity.

It is not our wealth—whether much or little—that stands in the way of serving God. The issue is ownership—God's!—and our role as stewards. In Scripture, wealth is not necessarily a bad thing (though it can be dangerous). According to 1 Timothy, much is expected of those who accumulate mammon. God richly provides us everything "for our enjoyment," but then the question is, "For what purpose?" Stewards are to do good with what God provides.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. (1 Tim 6:17–19)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus understands that we need a certain degree of wealth—indeed, that God provides it (Matt 6:32–33)—but to serve wealth is to

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possess so we can give, as when we share our food with the hungry; we'll give even while earning, as when we create goods and offer services with dedication, care and wisdom; and we'll give even by possessing, as when we open our home for others to enjoy. Earning and possessing are not just a bridge....but a midpoint in the flow of gifts; from God to us, and through us to others."²

Those of us who have the privilege of working in an office of seminary relations daily encounter incredible individuals and families. They, like us, have mammon. They also have powerful faith stories, and most of them can recall transforming moments in their life when they discovered that all things belong to God. Those of us who are pastors know that these people sit in our pews as well.

One of our donors tells the story of his early financial successes in life, motivated by acquiring as much as possible. However, the more he acquired, the less satisfied he was with life—joy and fulfillment were missing. It was a slow process for him, but nurtured by his faith community and the faith stories, testimonies, and invitation of others, he began to let go of what he had acquired, and little by little he discovered the joy of giving. Just recently he liquidated everything he owned to invest in a new company. He is still going to use all of his business skills, and his goal remains to make as much money as possible, even more than he had before, but this time with the intentional design of giving it all away for the kingdom of God. "It all belongs to God," he says, with a smile on his face.

More than one of our donors has said: "I could make a significant gift now, if necessary, but if you are willing to wait, I am confident that I will be able to give Luther Seminary far more if you allow me to manage the assets for a few more years."

Can you have mammon and serve God? In the broken, sinful, and imperfect world in which we live, the impossible becomes possible in the transforming presence of Christ. That's why I love the story of Zacchaeus. ⊕

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²Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 107.

deny God (Matt 6:24). The Parable of the Talents seems even to encourage the multiplication of mammon. But when ownership is claimed and the purpose is distorted, having and multiplying wealth can be a bad thing both for the person who has it and for organizations who might receive it.

The fine line between being entrusted and ownership is so easy to cross. As we know, Jesus talked about money more often than anything else other than the kingdom of God, and Jesus warned often of money's power and its potential to corrupt. The accumulation of mammon is seductive, and mammon is powerful enough that it can become another god in a person's life, if not the primary god. Though an extreme case, Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead when they withheld proceeds from the sale of their property (Acts 5:1–11). Living in a community that held everything in common, they were corrupted by money's power to break faith with others and with God, which led to their death.

In Luke 12:18, Jesus warned against building bigger barns to store more wealth. In other words, the prudent practice of saving can easily become hoarding. Again, the issue is purpose: To what end are we blessed with wealth? Saving is a prudent practice, as we learn from the example of Joseph in Egypt (Gen 41)—saving in order to provide for self and others in time of need—but hoarding (accumulating wealth for its own sake) is another matter. Again, we cross the line between having and owning, which shifts the focus away from God and onto self.

In Luke 18:18–30, Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give the money to the poor. Why? Jesus knew the ruler's warped sense of ownership would interfere with his relationship with God. Many of us would like to think that we can have mammon and serve God, but it is easy to overestimate our ability to resist wealth's seductive power to corrupt even the faithful. The issue is ownership. We remain stewards of the mammon that God has provided in the first place, using it to serve God and others. ⊕

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