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You Cannot Serve God and Mammon

A Reflection of the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Employed by a rich man, the manager in the parable is accused of squandering his master's resources. The dishonest manager realizes he is about to be fired. What should he do? He figures out a clever but thoroughly fraudulent scheme. While still on his position, he uses it to his advantage. He calls his master's debtors and reduces their bills by as much as 50 percent. He reasons that after he loses his job, the people who profited from his scheme, will take good care of him.

It's a clever scheme — so clever, in fact, that even the master whom he has defrauded, commends him for his shrewdness. Jesus, too, is impressed with his "astuteness." But at the conclusion of the parable, Christ points out the manager's serious flaw. He is accused of "buying friendship through cheating" (Lk 16: 9). He achieves his goal in a dishonest way.

The Lord's message is very relevant today, what with the rash of money launderings or making money through drug-trafficking, prostitution, pornography, and illegal gambling. Jesus says further, to our chagrin as His followers, "the children of this world are wiser in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Meaning, worldly people work harder for worldly rewards than Christians work for heavenly rewards.

There's a puzzling teaching in today's gospel. Jesus says, "No servant can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and mammon" (Lk 16: 13). The Lord is not making a clear distinction between God and money.

It is because in practical life, money is important. We need money to live, to support ourselves and families, to help sustain our economy. But money can become bad when it replaces God as the center of our life or when our sole pre-occupation is making money without regard for God and the spiritual values. This is what Jesus means.

I came across the story of a Catholic who combines his work, his material concerns with gospel values. His name is Charlie De Leo. He grew up as a "tough kid in New York's Lower East Side." After returning from Vietnam, he got a job as maintenance man at the Statue of Liberty.

Part of his job is to take care of the torch in the statue's hand and the crown in the statue's head. He has to make sure that the sodium vapor lights are always working and that the 200 glass windows in the torch and the crown are always clean.

But apart from his work, Charlie does other things for the Lord, as well. He received a recommendation from the Red Cross after donating his 65th pint of blood. And since hearing of the work of Mother Teresa in India, he has given over \$ 12, 000 to her and to people like her.

In an interview, he told reporters, "I don't socialize much, don't have fancy clothes, but I have fun.

The thing is, however, I don't have enough money to get married. I don't keep any of my money. After I got my job, I sponsored six orphans through those children's organizations."

So this man is a living example of what Jesus is saying in the gospel: He works for a living, for money but he knows how to share it with those who have less in life.

Our Lord expects us to be resourceful money makers, but in the light of the gospel teaching, He also expects us to be honest and to share our resources with the poor, keeping an eye on the eternal security which God alone can offer.

