12. MISSIONARY MONEY

And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury.—Mark 12:41.

"Not more men merely, but more man," is the way a thoughtful writers puts it, in speaking of the needs of the mission field. This is intended evidently to discriminate between quantity and quality in Christian laborers. But has it ever occurred to us to make a similar discrimination in missionary contributions? "Show me the tribute money," says our Lord, as He points to what has been gathered in the collection plates. "Whose image and superscription is this?" is His pressing question as He inspects our gifts. Is it enough that we are able to answer "Caesar's'? In other words, is hard cash the only requirement of our missionary treasuries? I contend not. There is money and money, and it is surely a fact that coins of exactly the same denomination may differ a million per cent in evangelical value, according as they bear only Caesar's image, or with it the image of Christ. More consecrated money—more money than has passed through the mint of prayer, and faith, and self-denial for the Lord's sake—this is the urgent need of the present.

Does anyone doubt that the "two mites" of that "certain poor widow" have brought a perpetual revenue into the
Lord’s treasury through the centuries, and are still yielding large income to the church? The Lord must have been computing the spiritual interest of her gift when He said: “She hath cast in more than they all.” In her offering there was sincere and whole-hearted consecration. She gave her all when she might have given a generous proportion, two mites when she could have thought she had done her duty in giving one. “By the undivided state of her purse,” says one, “she showed the undivided state of her heart.” Her intrinsically meager gift, because it represented uncalculating devotion, has been accumulating compound interest through the generations till it has become incalculably great. The matter is not a question of pounds and shillings and pence, therefore, when it comes to getting funds for missionary work, but of securing gifts which are quoted at par in the exchange of heaven. “Cornelius, thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God.”

1. Gifts for the Lord’s treasury, moreover, should come from a living hand, and not from a dead hand. Legacies and bequests designated for the missionary enterprise we may appreciate. Yet we question whether this kind of bestowal is most acceptable to God. The Christian’s obligation is first and foremost to his own generation. Why, then, should he studiously arrange to bestow his largess upon a generation that comes after him? Besides, post-mortem gifts lose vastly in that sympathetic quality which is so precious in Christian charity. To extend help to lost men from the skeleton fingers of a corpse, when one might have given it from the warm hand of a living compassion, is a loss both to giver and to receiver. Experience shows, too, that the latter is the only safe method of giving. By a strange irony of custom we call a man’s legacy his “will.” But as the history of such instruments shows, a legacy might be more truly described as an ingenious contrivance for defeating one’s will. What humiliating swindles are perpetrated on wealthy Christians by this last-will-and-testament device! We well remember a millionaire to whom we ministered in his sickness, a genuinely devout man, but a bequeather instead of a giver. He made death the administrator of his estate, and Esquire Sepulchre so managed it that, in large measure, it went to forwarding what during his lifetime the testator had most disfellowshipped, and to defrauding the missionary treasury of what he had intended it should have. The best remedy against such miscarriage is for the Christian to be his own executor. In our giving, as in everything else, God “worketh in us both to will and to do,” not to will only, leaving others to undo after we are gone and to thwart our most cherished intentions. The Christian’s calling is to be beneficent and not merely benevolent, a well-doer rather than a well-wisher.

If all disciples of Christ were to give while they live, and give according as the Lord has prospered them, what an impulse would be imparted to missionary work throughout the world. Edersheim, in his description of the ministry in the Jewish temple, dwells upon the rigid requirement of the law, that the offerer, in depositing his gift in the treasury, must bring it in his hand, not in his purse or by proxy, so sacredly personal was the transaction to be. In like manner, we believe, should Christians give—directly from a living palm, and not circuitously and from dead fingers. To make death our almoner and distributor is a worldly and unsanctified custom, invented, we seriously believe, by Satan himself, death’s most intimate friend, to defraud the Lord of His dues and to cheat the Christian out of his reward. Is it not distinctly declared in
the Scriptures that "we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he has done, whether it be good or bad"? Why, then, should Christians plan so industriously that their best deeds should be done after they have quit the body? Is there any promise of recompense for this extra corpus benevolence? "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?" says Paul. Let your worship of giving be carried on, then, in that temple, and not relegated to the narrow house of corruption.

"For whether is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?" We press this question of Jesus with regard to the matter under consideration. If our bodies have been consecrated through the indwelling of the Spirit the wealth which they have earned has thereby been made holy unto the Lord. Then let that wealth be offered upon the altar of a living heart and by the agency of a living hand. Let it be personal and not by proxy. Now, and for the meeting of present exigencies, let us cast our offerings into the treasury of the Lord. Let us give and give abundantly, singing in accompaniment to our gifts, "The grave cannot praise Thee, death cannot celebrate Thee, the living, the living, he shall praise Thee, as I do this day."

2. Gifts for the Lord's treasury should have in them the element of self-sacrifice. But there are methods of collecting money for missions, widely employed in our time, the tendency of which is to eliminate the sacrificial element and replace it with the element of luxury. Cash is cash indeed; but is not a dollar worth more to the Lord which comes directly from our hand than through the circuitous route of a church restaurant or an ecclesiastical entertainment? "Why," a devout Christian housewife may ask, "may not bake a cake and carry it to the church to be sold as my contribution to mission funds, and in this way render just as acceptable an offering as though I placed the amount received immediately in the collection plate?" Mark, however, the needless indirection involved. The frosting and flavoring of the loaf are delicately adjusted to satisfy the taste of the eater, when in the true worship of giving the mind ought to be free to be occupied with God, to whom the gift is brought. The direct giver careth for the things of the Lord, that she may render unto Him an acceptable sacrifice; the indirect giver careth for the things of the world, how she may please her customer. When her loaf is sold, he who buys gives nothing into the treasury, though he mistakenly thinks he does. Thus the charity, instead of being "twice blest," has been twice defrauded, once by her who baked and once by her who bought. Far better, then, the widow's mite than the widow's muffins.

Would that our churches might study the object lesson which the Salvation Army holds up before them. These poorest of the poor have their "months of self-denial" when, by stinting their narrow living, they are enabled to put thousands into the missionary treasury. If instead of the festivals so common in our churches, fasts could be instituted, without question there would be an outpouring of sanctified offerings beyond anything we have hitherto known.

While we speak thus of our luxurious manner of giving, something ought be said of our luxurious manner of spending. Leaving out now the matter of personal and family extravagance, let us direct our attention to that of the churches. On inquiry, we have found repeated instances where congregations have spent five times as much on quartet choirs as they have devoted to missions. On a recent Easter Sunday it was estimated that the churches of
New York City alone expended one hundred thousand dollars on floral decorations for their sanctuaries. This in the face of a perishing world, with its millions that have not heard the glad tidings of Christ risen from the dead, and in the sound of the cry which comes up from fainting laborers on every mission field for immediate re-enforcement.

Can the sacrifice of praise be interpreted to mean costly musical delicacies and dainties of song and sound in which art has the first place and the thought of what is pleasing to God is quite eclipsed? On the contrary, if, as wise commentators aver, 1 Corinthians 11:10, implies that the angels are invisible spectators of our worship, one is constrained to wonder how they must be impressed by the self-indulgence in our sanctuaries. May we not easily imagine them shutting their ears to these voluptuous strains of so-called sacred song, and holding their noses at these sickening odors of Easter flowers, and eagerly searching through the whole elaborate scene for the coveted opportunity of rejoicing “over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance”? It was not always so. The Reformed sects, as they were called, the Presbyterian, the Baptist, the Congregational, the Methodist groups, all began in plainness and godly simplicity of worship. But as wealth has increased, they have yielded, one after another, to the temptation of ecclesiastical extravagance, till their original Puritanism has quite vanished.

How shall we restore the element of sacrifice to our missionary giving, and so lift it out of the shameful parsimony which so often characterizes it? We must begin with ourselves, and set apart regularly a fixed portion of our income as sacred to the Lord. When the Hebrew brought his gift to lay it on the altar it was his till he withdrew his hand from it. Then it was God’s, and it would have been unpardonable sacrilege to put it to any common use.

Second, we must increase the proportion and frequency of our church contributions, so that it shall be seen that we regard missions as not an aside, but our principle business. The custom so widely prevalent of making an “annual effort,” and then shelving the subject of missions for a year, is a humiliation inflicted on the great commission.

Third, we must lay aside the unsanctified methods now so common in raising our missionary money. Luxury is a deadly foe to charity. If we attempt to yoke the two together in the service of Christ, the first will grow fatter and fatter, and the second more and more meager as the years pass. Let Christians set apart times when their households will live on plainest diet, and by such abstinence increase their ability to give for the Lord’s work. Except a man deny himself and take up his cross, he cannot truly be a disciple of Jesus.

Finally, we must return to the plain and primitive style of sanctuary service, such as prevailed in our early history. The difficulties here are confessedly great. Ecclesiastical fashions are quite as tyrannical as society fashions. Fine organs, stained-glass windows, traditional architecture, and “frozen music” have come to be regarded as so essential that he would be accounted a rash innovator who should counsel their complete disuse. Yet surely worship “in spirit and truth” and singing “with the spirit and the understanding” do not require these accessories.

If it be asked, “How about costly ministers?” we will not wince under the question. “Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live by the gospel.” But this scripture does not signify more than
modest support. It gives no warrant for inflated salaries and palatial parsonages and the accumulation of clerical fortunes. The lesson of history at this point is sufficiently emphatic.

In closing, let me urge upon you three questions. If, as we believe, the carrying out of the great commission is the first and highest obligation of every Christian, ought not the church to forego the luxuries of worship at home that she may provide for the necessities of missions abroad?

If, as says the Talmud, "almsgiving is the salt of riches," is it not to be feared that when Christians wait to give their alms from a dead hand, their salt will have lost its savor, and their riches, which might have been preserved, become corrupted, so as, in turn, to entail corruption on their children and their children's children.

If, as some believe, there is no second probation for those who have died without hearing the Gospel, can we reasonably expect any second probation for those who have passed through this life and done practically nothing to give the world the Gospel?

Systematic giving has been amply proved to be the best method. Milk a cow every other day and you will be sure to dry her up. How much more certainly will a church be dried up by infrequent giving. "Fifty-two gentle pulls at a man's purse-strings are more promotive of healthy generosity than one convulsive jerk on annual Sundays."