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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

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## ARTICLE XI.

THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF WEALTH.<sup>1</sup>

BY THE REV. CHARLES C. MERRILL.

## FIRST PAPER.

THERE are at least two reasons why one can distinguish the "Christian conception" of any human interest from "Christ's conception" of it. In the first place, as Ian MacLaren has pointed out in one of his books on religion,<sup>2</sup> Jesus did not give his truth to his followers in a developed form, but in the germ, as it were; and he intended that these seed thoughts should be gradually disclosed and unfolded as the centuries went on. "Christ's conception"—a purely historical question in New Testament theology—would give us the germ, while a "Christian conception" would discover the organism so far as it has now developed. In the second place, a "Christian conception" of any human problem would suggest a somewhat fuller use of Jesus' total view of life, of the fundamental principles of his teaching as a whole; while "Christ's conception" would more properly be confined to his more specific remarks on the subject under discussion. To get a true understanding of what Jesus would have his followers think about wealth, it is especially important to keep in mind

<sup>1</sup>The following books are referred to by the names of their authors only: Beyschlag, New Testament Theology (Eng. trans. 1895); Meyer, Commentaries on Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Eng. trans. 6th German edition; always under the passage cited); Plummer, International Critical Commentary on Luke; Weiss, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Eng. trans. from third revised edition); Edersheim, Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (8th Ed. Longmans); Wendt, The Teaching of Jesus (Eng. trans. 1894).

<sup>2</sup>The Mind of the Master, chap. ii.

constantly this larger use of his central principles. "Christian social ethics," Dr. Smyth truly says, "are to be measured not entirely by the particular social precepts we may find treasured up in the New Testament, but by the whole intention of the Spirit of Christ, as it is to be gathered from Christian history."<sup>1</sup>

A full treatment of our subject would thus evidently involve: (1) an investigation of Jesus' specific and implied teaching concerning wealth; (2) a setting forth of their historical development, that is, of what the Apostolic and post-Apostolic Fathers, the Schoolmen, the Reformers, etc., thought about wealth, and of their interpretation of Christ's teaching; (3) an effort to make a present-day application of the principles which have emerged. All of this is too great a task for our present opportunity, and we shall therefore omit here any discussion of the historical development, except to refer briefly to New Testament writings other than the Gospels. Such a review would undoubtedly yield material of great interest and would have an important bearing on our whole investigation. But when we reflect how frequent has been the deviation from the real teaching of Jesus during the years since his coming, how contrary to the essential spirit of his life has been much of the conduct enjoined by the church; and when we remember that to-day we are apparently nearer than ever before to the essential elements of the mind of Christ, is it not plain that we cannot go far wrong if we shall here take the specific teaching of Jesus regarding wealth, together with some aspects of his fundamental life-view, and attempt a direct application to certain modern needs and questions?

### I.

Every great teacher who wishes to influence men toward right thinking and conduct often feels compelled to devote

<sup>1</sup> Newman Smyth, *Christian Ethics*, p. 374.

his attention, first of all, to removing their erroneous ideas. We are not surprised, therefore, to find that a main part of the teaching of Jesus regarding wealth is an endeavor to uproot the notion, deeply seated in men's minds, that the mere possession of this world's goods has some intrinsic value; that they are in some way an end, and not wholly a means.

To begin with, Jesus lays down the principle that one's heart and mind cannot be set on two things at the same time: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. vi. 24; Luke xvi. 13); for we are like a slave who cannot serve two masters at the same time, because, as he legally belongs to both, in obeying one he will necessarily neglect the commands of the other.<sup>1</sup> Therefore a choice is to be made between the service of God on one side and the service of mammon, which is here a personification of wealth, on the other. Which of these is to be chosen, Jesus makes clear in the passage which immediately follows this verse (Matt. vi. 25-34; Luke xii. 22-31).<sup>2</sup> After warning against all anxious care for one's bodily need, which is based, as Tholuck<sup>3</sup> suggests, on the idea that God does not care, which leads one to forget his dependence on God and make food and clothing the *summum bonum*, Jesus insists that men are to seek God's kingdom wholly, that is, they are to think of God's rulership and the right character which he demands as the one matter of supreme concern to them, and their hearts are to be entirely weaned from the pursuit of mere earthly well-being, for God will see that all this is added to them (Matt. vi. 33; Luke xii. 31).<sup>4</sup> This requirement to separate the heart entirely from

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wendt, Vol. ii. p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew places this in his Sermon on the Mount, but its position in Luke is the more probable one—after the parable of the Rich Fool.

<sup>3</sup> Commentary on Sermon on the Mount (Eng. trans. 1869).

<sup>4</sup> Meyer (on Matthew) opposes the ordinary interpretation of this verse—that we are to seek God's kingdom and his righteousness *first*,

earthly goods is expressed with even more emphasis in the words, "Sell that ye have, and give alms. . . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke vi. 33-34; cf. the probable parallel in Matt. vi. 19-21, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures in heaven," etc.).

Abundant reason for this supreme choice of God and absolute renunciation of mammon is found in the incomparable value to each man of his higher life or his soul—that part of his being which links him with God (Mark viii. 36-37 and parallels in Matthew and Luke). Even the whole *κόσμος*, the largest conception of material goods which a man can have (that is, the control of it all, not balked in a single desire or purpose because of inability to possess), cannot for a moment be set over against the interests of the spiritual life; for there is nothing which can be given in exchange for the individual soul. The non-permanency of earthly riches ("moth and rust doth consume" and "thieves break through and steal," Matt. vi. 19) furnishes another motive for abandoning them wholly as an end of human endeavor, especially when it is remembered that heavenly treasures, as contrasted with the earthly, are lasting and enduring ("neither moth nor rust doth consume," "thieves do not break through nor steal"—Matt. vi. 20; cf. Luke xii. 33).

It is not strange, then, when riches become a *summum bonum* to a man, when his heart is set upon them and cannot be withdrawn from them in any other way, that Jesus requires him to give them up and assume a condition of poverty. The case of the Rich Young Man who so eagerly asked Jesus how he might inherit eternal life, and was finally bidden to part with all his wealth and become a fool and *afterwards* are to provide for our own physical needs. He thinks it means, we are to seek God's kingdom and righteousness *only*. For does it not say that "all these things shall be added"? Hence we are not to seek them at all. The verse in Luke, where *τράπεζα* is omitted, seems to support this view, and it is adopted above.

lower of Jesus in his itinerant ministry (Mark x. 17-22 and parallels in Matthew and Luke), does not furnish an illustration of what Jesus commands every one who would become a Christian to do; but it shows what is the requirement for every one whose state of heart is the same as his, and makes it clear that all must renounce in principle, if not actually, their devotion to earthly goods.

Now this renunciation of wealth, either in principle or in actuality, is plainly a difficult thing for a rich man to do, as was shown when one who had so many good qualities as this young ruler went away sorrowing at Jesus' final word. It therefore came about that those who gathered about Jesus' standard were mainly poor men; and near the beginning of his ministry he could truthfully say to his disciples, "Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God!" and to his opponents, "Woe unto you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation" (Luke vi. 20, 24; cf. Matt. v. 3)—not that any of them were blessed or cursed simply because they were rich or poor, but that, as a matter of fact, riches were a great hindrance to entering the kingdom of God, and poverty seemed to be an advantage for such entrance. He also sought to express in a vivid way the fact that the fundamental question to be asked concerning a man was not at all one of external possessions or conditions, and the man who plumed himself upon any outward prosperity was bound grievously to be deceived.<sup>1</sup> (Cf. James ii. 5, "Did not God choose them

<sup>1</sup>The question, whether, in the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew or Luke gives us more nearly the original words of Jesus, may be said to be still unsettled. Authorities are divided: e.g., Tholuck, Meyer, Weiss, Weizsächer favor Matthew; Godet, Wendt, Plummer favor Luke. The principal argument for Matthew is the so-called ascetic or anti-wealth tendency in Luke, who or one of whose sources seems to seize many opportunities neglected by the other evangelists to inveigh against wealth and those that possess it. The principal argument for Luke is that it seems easier to suppose the addition of the words "in spirit," by Matthew (in Matt. v. 3) than their omission by

that are poor as to the world to be rich in faith," etc.) And thus, in commenting on the sad departure of this young man to whom he had been drawn so strongly, Jesus had good reason to say, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" A moment later he expressed the same thought still more vividly when the disciples seemed amazed at his first remark, by adding, "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" (Mark x. 23, 25, and parallels in Matthew and Luke).<sup>1</sup> While Luke (in Luke vi. 20). This latter argument appears to me to make his originality very probable, especially as I do not find this ascetic tendency to be sufficiently marked in Luke to justify any serious questioning of his substantially accurate reproduction of Jesus' teaching regarding wealth. On this assumption, free use will be made of Luke's material in the entire discussion. It is no doubt true that Luke had a special interest in, and sympathy with, the poorer classes, and that he was in a marked degree drawn to those features in the life and teaching of Jesus which suggested hostility to the rich. This strong feeling may probably be accounted for by the circumstances of the time in which he wrote. We may also admit that Luke's personal attitude toward the rich has given a somewhat peculiar tinge to the tradition as he has handed it down to us. On the other hand, however (as Plummer suggests), Luke does not, if rightly interpreted, teach that wealth is sinful, or that rich men must necessarily give away all their wealth, or that the wealthy may be despoiled by the poor. Moreover, he is not at all consistent in his antagonism to wealth, nor does he apparently make use of all the ascetic material within his reach. Observe, for example, that he omits reference to "the *deceitfulness* of riches" (viii. 14), in the parable of the Sower, while the other evangelists retain it (Matt. xiii. 22; Mark iv. 19); that he does not speak of the apostles' having forsaken lands (xviii. 29), as do the other writers (Matt. xix. 29; Mark x. 29); that he alone speaks of Jesus' dining with a Pharisee (Luke vii. 36-50); that he commends the rich Joseph of Arimathea (xxiii. 50-51; cf. Mark xv. 43 and Matt. xxvii. 57). It may be said in reply, that, while these omissions and insertions show that the entire Gospel is not consistently ascetic, they do not touch the claim that there is in it an ascetic source or document. But we must ask for the proof of such a document standing by itself in the Gospel, and I think it will be very difficult to show its distinct existence, since these non-ascetic expressions or omissions can be found in all parts of the book. On this entire subject cf. Plummer, p. xxv f.

<sup>1</sup> Needle's eye is to be taken literally here. The expression is a pro-

the first of these sentences expresses the difficulty of a rich man's putting himself under God's rule, the second declares its utter impossibility. It is not at all necessary to take the latter as a hyperbolic expression, if we remember that Jesus immediately afterwards said, "all things are possible with God" (Mark x. 27 and parallels).

There are also two parables in the Gospel of Luke which seem to point out to the rich the same peril to their spiritual well-being. No doubt the most apparent teaching in the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke xii. 16-21) is that bodily life cannot be lengthened or affected by riches, since "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (ver. 15). But it is also certainly shown here that the man who supposes that the accumulation and enjoyment of a great sufficiency of earthly goods will furnish him any real blessedness or happiness is utterly self-deceived.

The second of these parables—that of Dives and Lazarus (Luke xvi. 19-31)—will be rightly understood only if we connect it immediately with the preceding 15th verse, in which Jesus condemns the Pharisees, who were lovers of money "and had scoffed at him" (ver. 14), for justifying themselves in the sight of men, and says that God knoweth their hearts, and here, as always, abominates that which is merely exalted among men. In illustration of this general feeling on God's part, the parable shows, in its first section (ver. 19-26), how the positions of men in this life are reversed in the next world, and how God's judgment is entirely different from man's; and in its second part (ver. 27-31) it is made clear that the present wealth and high position of the Pharisees did not shield them from the penalty of their unbelief in divine truth when it was proclaimed—especially by Jesus. The rich man, then, verbal one, denoting that a thing cannot possibly happen. Cf. Plummer, Edersheim (Vol. ii. p. 342); *contra*, Godet, Commentary on Luke.

in both these parables is taught the absolute folly and futility of trusting in or holding to his wealth as in any way promoting his spiritual welfare or shielding him from eternal loss. He is to be on his guard against that deceitfulness of riches, which chokes the word and makes it unfruitful (Mark iv. 19=Matt. xiii. 22; cf. Luke viii. 14). It is true, as the writer of 1 Timothy points out, that "they that desire to be rich fall into a temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown men in destruction and perdition" (vi. 9); and the "rich in this present world" are rightly charged "that they be not high-minded, nor have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches" (vi. 17). (Cf. also James i. 10-11.)

The principle of renunciation inculcated in the passages which we have cited is in entire accord with the general spirit and trend of the teaching of Jesus. It is in harmony with that idea of heart-righteousness which is so constantly insisted on by him, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. The question is not at all, in Jesus' mind, as to a man's external deeds or achievements or position, but has to do solely with the innermost state of the heart. It also agrees with his steadfast opposition to dualism in any form and his strenuous assertion of God's absolute supremacy in his world, that he is one and all in all. For if you once allow that wealth has intrinsic worth, as compared with God's purpose for your life, you are establishing another power in the world contrary to him, to which you admit you owe allegiance. It is, once more, accordant with his doctrine of the kingdom of God, which involves, as one of its main features, the declaration that God's rule in men's lives ought to be supreme, that every man is bound, first of all and above everything else, to acknowledge in thought and acts God's absolute kingship of his being.

## II.

It is evident from the foregoing that Jesus intended to impress with the utmost emphasis upon the minds of his disciples the truth that earthly goods, in and of themselves, have no real value whatever, and that the contrary belief is fraught with the gravest disaster to the soul. But we ought at once to notice that this does not involve asceticism, the entire separation of the Christian from all interest in, or pursuit of, wealth. Nor does it mean that the thoroughly consecrated follower of Jesus is to neglect to earn his own livelihood, looking to others for support, or that he is simply to get sufficient food, clothing, and shelter for himself and those immediately dependent on him, and refuse to amass wealth or engage in what is commonly called "making money." Jesus does not imply that there is intrinsic merit in any one of these courses of action or inaction.

No doubt it is true that on the surface a good case could be made out for Jesus' supposed belief in an ascetic attitude toward wealth. We have, first of all, his life—he had no home (Luke ix. 58=Matt. viii. 20: "The foxes have holes," etc., "but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head"); he was supported by friends (Luke viii. 3, "which ministered unto them of their substance"); and that he and his company were poor is probably implied in the gathering up of the fragments after the feeding of the five thousand (cf. Mark vi. 43 and parallels; and Mark viii. 8 and parallel). Next, we recall how the four fishermen on the Sea of Galilee in following Jesus left behind all earthly possessions, presumably in compliance with his request (Luke v. 11; cf. Mark i. 18, 20=Matt. iv. 20, 22); and how Matthew "forsook all, and rose up and followed him" (Luke v. 28; cf. Mark ii. 14=Matt. ix. 9). Finally, many of the passages explained above could easily be interpreted in an ascetic fashion—in fact, many commentators claim

that this is their only true interpretation. It is said that Jesus' attitude was one of uncompromising hostility to the rich as such; and that he would have his disciples get rid of their present possessions and have as little thereafter to do with wealth as possible. Such a verse as Luke xii. 33 "Sell that ye have and give alms," etc. (cf. Matt. vi. 19-20), would be quoted in support of this position.

But certainly such a view is a superficial one, and does not give a true view of what Jesus would have his disciples think about wealth. For it is to be remembered, in the first place, that Jesus' life was a special one, lived for a special purpose, and in a special way, and that it is not to be reproduced exactly and formally by his followers to-day. The mere fact that he was a constant traveler and that it was in accord with his life plan to have no definite and regular means of support or abiding-place does not prove that all Christians must imitate him in an ascetic mode of living. There are, moreover, distinct indications that Jesus' way of life was not consistently ascetic. Witness his attendance on the marriage at Cana (John ii. 1-11); his healing Jairus' daughter, and the centurion's servant (Mark v. 21-24, 35-43, and parallels in Matthew and Luke; and Matt. viii. 5-13 and parallel in Luke); his friendship with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (John iii. 1 ff.; vii. 50; xix. 38, 39); his dining with rich Pharisees and rich publicans (e.g. Luke vii. 36 ff.; v. 29, and parallels in Mark and Matthew). Indeed, in comparing himself with the ascetic John the Baptist, he distinctly disclaims that such was his manner of life, for he "caine eating and drinking," and was accused, not of being an ascetic, but of being "a gluttonous man and a winebibber" (Matt. xi. 18-19=Luke vii. 33-34).

As for the apostles who abandoned their worldly goods to follow him, passing over the fact that our attention is called to this only in the Gospel of Luke, it is to be no-

ticed that here also we are dealing with men who are called to a particular work in connection with the founding of Christianity; that their example is to be followed universally is not clear. The true meaning of that portion of the teaching of Christ which might be thought to inculcate an ascetic view of wealth has already been shown, or will be set forth later. It is not actual renunciation of material goods which he demands, but a renunciation in principle—the heart must be entirely separated from them; they are to be wholly subordinated to the highest task in life. Jesus had a way of speaking with “an impressive pregnancy”—what has been called “the principle of aiming at the greatest clearness in the briefest compass”<sup>1</sup>—that sometimes led him to utter what seemed like thoroughgoing denunciation of wealth; but there is no clear indication that he deemed houses and lands, and gold and silver, abundance of food and clothing, and everything else which goes to make up wealth, as an evil in and of themselves, or that he thought there was anything necessarily contaminating and defiling in the possession or use of them. Indeed, his command to pray “Give us day by day our daily bread” (Luke xi. 3=Matt. vi. 11), and the statement, even if it is not to be taken literally, that the disciples should receive “a hundredfold now in this time, houses . . . and lands, with persecutions” (Mark x. 29–30; cf. parallels in Matthew and Luke), would seem to point definitely in the other direction.

The strenuousness of Jesus' principle is, however, not lessened but increased, when we do not give his teaching an ascetic interpretation. It is infinitely harder for a man to divorce his heart from earthly goods when he engages in the world's business every day, and mingles in the common affairs of men, than when he cuts himself entirely

<sup>1</sup>Wendt, Vol. i. p. 130; cf. his discussion of this principle in the following pages.

aloof from them. In the latter case, there is one supreme act of self-sacrifice, and then the worst is over; but in the former, there must be a constant struggle between strongly opposing forces. For the ideal which Jesus holds before men is incomparably high: "God is supreme," he says. "You must serve him alone; at the infinite peril of all which has any real value in this world or the next, of your highest and only true interests, do you set your heart on anything else." With an overpowering sense of the immense danger of being drawn away by the things of the world, and of the irreparable loss thus involved, a man might resolve, "I will go out of temptation, as far as I can; I will have nothing to do with anything which is so likely to drag me down and cause me to lose my soul, as wealth." But Jesus forbids this, except in rare cases. His behest is, Continue in the world; do not abandon your wealth, do not give up the legitimate pursuit of it; but disengage your heart from it, do not become enamored of it, do not let it control or master you in any way, for thereby you will lose your life. Who will say that this is not a task of supreme difficulty, calling out the most powerful moral resources in every man?