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Matthew 6:24

24. “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

The following is a reading from a book entitled “Will The Real Heretics Please Stand Up” by David Bercot-- that my son James shared with me this past Lord’s day.

“No one can serve two masters,” declared Jesus to his disciples (Matthew 6:24). However, Christians have spent the greater portion of the past two millenniums apparently trying to prove Jesus wrong. We have told ourselves that we can indeed have both--the things of God and the things of this world. Many of us live our lives no differently than do conservative non-Christians, except for the fact that we attend church regularly each week. We watch the same entertainment. We share the same concerns about the problems of this world. And we are frequently just as involved in the world’s commercial and materialistic pursuits. Often, our being “not of this world” exists in theory more than in practice.

But the church was not originally like that. The first Christians lived under a completely different set of

principles and values than the rest of mankind. They rejected the world's entertainment, honors, and riches. They were already citizens of another kingdom, and they listened to the voice of a different Master. This was as true of the second century church as it was of the first.

The work of an unknown author, written in about 130, describes Christians to the Romans as follows: "They dwell in their own countries simply as sojourners.... They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time, they surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death, but [will be] restored to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich. They possess few things; yet, they abound in all. They are dishonored, but in their very dishonor are glorified.... And those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred."

Because the earth wasn't their home, the early Christians could say without reservation, like Paul, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). Justin Martyr explained to the Romans, "Since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men put us to death. Death is a debt we must all pay anyway.

A second-century elder exhorted his congregation, "Brothers, let us willingly leave our sojourn in this present world so we can do the will of Him who called us.

And let us not fear to depart out of this world,... deeming the things of this world as not belonging to us, and not fixing our desires upon them.... The Lord declares, ‘No servant can serve two masters.’ If we desire, then, to serve both God and Money, it will be unprofitable for us. ‘For what will it profit if a man gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?’ This world and the next are two enemies.... We cannot therefore be the friends of both.”

Cyprian, the respected overseer of the church in Carthage, stressed a similar theme in a letter he wrote to a Christian friend: “The one peaceful and trustworthy tranquility, the one security that is solid, firm, and never changing, is this: for a man to withdraw from the distractions of this world, anchor himself to the firm ground of salvation, and lift his eyes from earth to heaven.... He who is actually greater than the world can crave nothing, can desire nothing, from this world. How stable, how unshakable is that safeguard, how heavenly is the protection in its never-ending blessings--to be free from the snares of this entangling world, to be purged from the dregs of earth, and fitted for the light of eternal immortality.”

The same themes run throughout all the writings of the early Christians, from Europe to North Africa: we can't have both Christ and the world.