



Matthew 19:16-26

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Gospel reading for this morning, together with the whole body of the Church's teaching for the last two thousand years, explicitly informs us that our attachment to possessions and the love and desire for *material* as opposed to spiritual things darkens and confuses our minds and hearts, causing spiritual illness. In the very materialistic West today this sickness has become a plague, although because of the collapsing world economy, grievous and hurtful as this is in many ways, especially for those already poor, many people are finding out just how very dependent we've become on material comforts and ease and how very far away this habit of mind has led us from "the one thing needful," which is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our greed for more and more possessions, which has been ruthlessly fed by the media and the advertising industry in our time, has also, according to the Holy Fathers, both ancient and modern, given birth to many outright evils—such as countless worries and cares, distrust of others and ugliness towards them, refusing to forgive our enemies, improper care of the environment, wars and exploitation of the poor and, ultimately, it leads to the loss of one's soul for all eternity. This can also happen to a whole society, a whole nation, a whole country, and this is why the Lord says, clearly, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon"—which is to say, we cannot serve both God and evil at the same time.

In English the word "mammon" comes to us from Latin, Greek and, ultimately, Aramaic, and originally meant literally "that in which one trusts", but the Gospel use of the term is a bit more refined: it refers to loving and trusting in money and wealth, rather than loving and trusting God. In this sense, the Holy Fathers understood "mammon" to be what today we call materialism, a false god, for nothing that we possess can possibly save us and take us safely to the Kingdom of Heaven. The fourth century Father of the Church, St. Gregory of Nyssa, took it a step further and wrote that mammon is also the name of one of the top demons, also known as Beelzebub. Thus, those who live their lives according to the agenda of materialism are actually worshipping a demon! This is why the materialism of

August 26, 2012

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*Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete*



our culture has now led to what can frankly be described as a “culture of death”, of violence and animal-like savagery, instilling constant fear and anxiety in the populace.

But mark well: this does not mean that money and wealth are in themselves evil. They have their place, their purpose, and when they are used wisely and well, especially to help the poor and the Church, they are blessed by God. It is only love or obsession with these things that are sinful.

Materialism is the very thing that prevented the rich young man in today’s Gospel from following the Lord when he came to ask how to achieve salvation, even though he was already faithfully keeping the commandments of the Old Law. The Lord said plainly that this is not enough when He declared to the young man, “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow Me.”

This is pretty radical for most of us comfortable, middle class materialists. But it’s right there in the Gospel; these are indeed the very words of the Savior. These are the “words of life”. But we don’t want to hear them; we ignore them.

Of course the Lord did say that to follow the commandment to perfection, as He had just delivered it to the rich young man, is something very difficult; in fact, from a purely human standpoint, it’s impossible. And so His disciples, standing nearby and watching and listening to this amazing conversation between their Master the rich young man, exclaimed “Who then can be saved?” Now, keep in mind that the followers of the Lord were not themselves at all rich; they were poor, and many of them simple fishermen, so they weren’t speaking of themselves. But they saw that what Christ was now teaching would be something very, very hard for others. And so the Lord replied:

*“With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.”*

St. John Chrysostom comments, in his inestimable way: “First Christ with His gentle gaze sets at rest the troubled and fearful minds of the disciples, and then He says that it is impossible for rich men to be saved as long as they are

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tightly bound by the ties of avarice and it is impossible for them to be freed from this torment by their own power. God, however, can save them, as indeed, He can do all things. And God *will* save the rich, if they offer Him their own efforts and call upon Him...”

And, as St. John Chrysostom also said when commenting on this Gospel account, if we do not feel we can follow the radical invitation to perfection we can at least make sure that we follow all of the other commandments and at least avoid avarice and greed; and that we love and forgive our neighbor share with others from our own bounty. “Let us,” he said, “who are followers of the Gospel, see whether we love our neighbors as ourselves and not do them any harm, but share our wealth with them; for this [in itself] is still a high and great thing...Methinks,” St. John added, that “there are few who fulfill this commandment today!” ....

Now St. John Chrysostom was writing and preaching more than 1500 years ago. I hate to think what he would say about so-called Christian society and culture in the world today!

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