

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 3 -

THE DRY-ROT OF COVETOUSNESS

"Not like a hireling for his selfish gain
With backward glances and reluctant tread,
Making a merit of his coward dread,
But cheerful in the light around him thrown
Walking as one to pleasant service led."

"He that is an hireling and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep." - (John 10:12, 13).

DRY-ROT IN TIMBER is a disease which occasions the destruction of the fibres, and reduces timber eventually to a mass of dry dust. It occurs most readily in a warm, moist, stagnant atmosphere. Wet-rot is the result of the exposure of wood to repeated changes of climatic conditions. What is true in nature is found again and again in the ministry. Without spiritual "seasoning" or "preserving," a man is in danger.

An Old Testament story illustrates this (cf. 2 Kings 5): Elisha had succeeded Elijah and taken Gehazi as his servant. In all probability, Gehazi would have become Elisha's successor. He was called to that prophetic task, trained for it, and already assisting his master. But he had carried with him seeds of decay and had never completely broken with his past life. When Elisha followed after Elijah, he burned his old tools and cut clean away from the former employment. But nothing of this is suggested in the case of Gehazi, and the commercial, bargaining spirit was present throughout his association with the prophet, until, in a crisis, he was unmasked and undone. Even the New Testament knows something of the same sin within the church, and the names of Ananias, Sapphira, and Judas are not unfamiliar.

A man engaged in the prophetic office is not immune from the temptation, and Gehazi's words are striking: **"I will run after him, and take something of him"** (verse 20). Self-interest was the dominating motive of his life, and although GOD had given to Naaman cleansing from leprosy without charge to display His grace, this small-minded soul must make capital out of him. The Tenth Commandment still stands: **"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbour's"** (Exodus 20:17).

Elisha under GOD helped Naaman gratuitously, but Gehazi's act marred a gesture of grace and detracted from the glory of GOD. And GOD is jealous for His glory!

When Gehazi said: "**My master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought**" (verse 20), he was questioning GOD's way of blessing. He who would revise the method appointed by divine strategy sets himself up as greater than the gracious Giver. Discontent with his position and false aim about "getting on in the world" led Gehazi into this pernicious attitude. He little realized that a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things possessed. Of course not, when you think of it! Life is independent of properties and dividends. Life is a trust and a probation, wherein character is eternal worth, and where spiritual dependence brings temporal independence.

It is to be noted in the same connection that this man referred to Naaman as "**this Syrian!**" There was gathered up in that reference all the contempt of a foolish spirit intoxicated with aggrandisement. Such an epithet finds echo in others when men and nations refer to some of their fellows with disdain, or treat another people as less than human by their aggression and conquest, ruthlessly. As though a so-called colonization by poison gas could be anything but an excuse to satisfy greed for wealth and possession! So a nation and a Gehazi prove that dry-rot in character corresponds to the deterioration of tissue in wood. All the evils of life are not from without: some are from within, even covetousness.

Gehazi was a small man, devoid of those great moral qualities which mean strength. Hypocrisy and misrepresentation followed his act, and soon there was a nemesis of judgment. He pretended to be what he was not, and acted a part when he glibly assured Naaman that "**All is well. My master hath sent me**" (verse 22). For a while his position seemed assured with his ill-gotten gains, but his master's simple question about duty came and he stood unmasked (verse 25). Then followed Elisha's stern rebuke and searching indictment of the servant of GOD who thinks solely in terms of rewards or material possessions divorced from stewardship and sacrifice. "**Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants?**" (verse 26)

That Gehazi went out leprous was but a fitting expression of his inner self: he was contaminated within. His motive in service was not disinterested. There is no wrong in possessing material things or handling the coinage of this world, but a spirit of acquisitiveness will wreck the finest life. A visitor to the Casino in the South of France has said he was profoundly moved by the sad faces of those who gambled.

To turn from Gehazi is to scrutinize our own life.

Christian men are not immune from this soporific. Servants of GOD have been known to be lax in the handling of money and possessions. It should be an axiom of the Christian life that no man of GOD goes into debt: he should not owe his people anything, and he should live always within his income, however small. Here we should be above suspicion and wholly trustworthy in handling money. Money is not an evil in itself: it is used for good or evil. But the greed of pelf is a deadly disease. Is the charge unwarranted that certain of the brethren are noted for their large fees, and not for the sanctity and blessing of their ministry?

Naturally, expenses must be met, but no one should ever make a charge for his services in preaching the Gospel. Sometimes generous expenses are given: sometimes very little is offered, to the shame of the contracting people who have benefited and the pecuniary embarrassment of the minister. But a man of GOD must learn to serve without reference to imposed conditions of fees. The blight is noticed, too, in churches estimating by the remuneration expected the value of a minister whom they would like to call. Some men are in one class and others, in another. Here can be seen inequalities of allowances, and there seems to be room for a more practical display of Christian brotherhood in this regard (cf. II Corinthians 11:5-12).

It has been wisely counselled to young men about to give themselves to the work of GOD that they should not be salary-hunters. We are not free to bargain or negotiate in the way of the business man whose value is computed in terms of dollars or pounds. No ministry is to be reckoned on a cash basis, but in moral and spiritual investment which will give dividends of character and souls for the Kingdom of GOD.

When GOD transmutes our stewardship and service into the coinage of Heaven, who is sufficient to judge by the use of the temporal canon? The richest scope for the whole range of a man's powers is in CHRIST's service. Our devotion to this vocation is not to be determined by any financial return. The covetous spirit is crucified. When J. P. Struthers, of Greenock, left the University of Glasgow in 1870 to engage in theological studies for the ministry, Professor Caird offered him a chair of Greek in Australia at six hundred pounds a year.

This was a high emolument in those days, and the offer was one which few students in his circumstances would have refused. But Struthers did refuse it, to the surprise of his teacher. The professor learned that day that the spirit of the Covenanters was not yet dead. "Will you," asked Caird, "reject this offer to become a Cameronian minister at eighty pounds a year?" "I cannot help it, sir," Struthers replied. "I have made up my mind to be a minister."

To read the Life and Letters of J. P. Struthers is to thrill at the strength of a great trust which this man kept untarnished by a spirit devoid of covetousness.

Gehazi is not alone as a warning: every under-shepherd knows the tragedy of Judas.

Our Lord chose him to be with Him, yet with all his finer qualities his mind was like a mint grinding out money. He had a materialized conception of the Kingdom and at heart he was avaricious. This evil passion warped his abilities and induced him to pilfer what was in the bag. What should have been given to the poor, Judas kept for himself. But then, he was a lost man.

John Bunyan has upon his stage Mister Hold-the-World, Mister Money-Love, and Mister Save-All. These had been schoolfellows in their youth, under the tuition of Mister Gripeman, a schoolmaster in Love-Gain, which is a market-town in the country of Coveting, in the North. (A rather sinister suggestion is in that little phrase "in the North"!)

This schoolmaster taught his pupils the art of getting, either by violence, flattering, lying, or by putting on the guise of religion. Christian could not be persuaded by the enticements of a Demas, gentleman-like, to leave the pilgrim path, but tells him that Gehazi was his grandfather and Judas his father.

Gehazi is the symbol of evil leprosy worked by covetousness in a man's nature, and Balaam is another warning against avarice as the one black spot which Scripture points out in a man of

religious genius. Balaam did not love unrighteousness, but he loved the wages of unrighteousness, and he did the unrighteous thing. So with Achan, who brought defeat and shame upon his people by his yielding to this subtle temptation. In a day when this evil was prevalent in Israel, Samuel the prophet vindicated himself from all suspicion (1 Samuel 12:1-5).

It is worth noting that we do not overcome this temptation by asking for poverty, as some monkish orders. A better prayer is:

"Give me neither poverty or riches,
But a heart at leisure from itself."

GOD may make us stewards of wealth - what then? By active and systematic benevolence we are saved in the hour of peril. But not by a display of giving, lest we fall into the same condemnation of coveting the praise of men. Then, "verily, we have our reward." Yet we can be liberal without niggardliness in the spirit of our giving. The avenue of temptation is in the love of position, the lure of the larger salary, the easier and more indulgent life, and denial of faith in the providential care of GOD.

The late Dr. Arthur T. Pierson knew something of the struggle between greed and grace. As a student he very early learned a lesson in giving. In the possession of his first one hundred dollars as the result of summer work, and with board and lodging provided, he felt free to "salt down" the precious gold against a day of future need or indulgence. Greed had unconsciously begun to tighten its grip upon him. For the first time in his life he tasted the luxury of hoarding money, and the taste was sweet. But just then a personal friend came to the same seminary to begin his theological studies. Pierson learned accidentally (or was it providentially?) that he was in need and had come from a home of poverty. His hoarded one hundred dollars began to trouble him and the battle between greed and grace began. After much thought and prayer, he decided to give his friend one-half of the money as a loan. It was the beginning of his discipline in the school of faith. GOD supplied his own need, and this first lesson in the handling of money was never unlearned. It relaxed the giver's love for gold and taught him how to transmute material things into spiritual power.

Another instance in the life of the same Christian stalwart may be cited. At the age of fifty-two years, a period when many men have laid aside something for old age and a few begin to think of the day of retiring from active service, he was not without temptations to accept positions which afforded earthly comforts and called for a less heroic exercise of faith in GOD. On one such occasion, when he had found his financial responsibilities heavy, he recorded in his diary:

"I was approached to consider a call to the --- church, but I felt moved to discourage it. The temptation was the greatest I remember to have undergone. Here are riches, a soft nest, a kind people, a life tenure and provision for disablement or for widowhood of wife. But over against this is my long testimony against large salaries, wealth and worldliness in churches and the conviction that this ease would be purchased at the cost of my wider work for missions. I feel called to self-denial for CHRIST . . . I purpose to separate all considerations of money, so far as is possible, from the interests of the Kingdom of GOD. I record my confidence that all needful good will be added to us according to GOD's promise."

The next twenty years were the most widely useful of his life.

A lovely valley amidst the mountains can be spoiled by a mine, and especially if the mine fails to produce the precious ore! Often character in the Christian man rots because of yielding to the trap of covetousness. "What shall it profit a servant of GOD if he gains but to lose his own soul?" Leanness of soul is a terrible price to pay for this blight. We are saved if we do not speculate and if we honour GOD with our substance. John Wesley, who died childless, warned parents against leaving a fortune to their children. His use of money was such that, out of the wealth received for his publications, he died leaving a couple of silver spoons! William Carey ranks high as one who refused to be dazzled by the evil eye of greed, and although a government gave him a princely salary as a professor of languages in India, he used most of it for the cause of missions, ever remaining the true missionary.

It has to be confessed that some men have abandoned the ministry for the sake of expecting a larger salary in a different field of labour. If a man is called of GOD, that side-tracking would be an injury to life and influence.

Brethren, when we think of the world's scale of values, we are thus tempted. The boxer, the baseball player, the successful business man, and others have their ratios far above the allowance offered to preachers. But remember, a Milton received only \$50 for Paradise Lost, a Beethoven lost \$100 in producing his Ninth Symphony, and Sir Ronald Ross, who discovered the secret of combating malaria, had to sell his papers in the eventide of life to provide modest comfort for himself and his wife. The ministry is a stewardship of the grace of GOD, and out of seeming limitation there is poetry, and without a fortune a preacher can enrich thousands and prepare them for the final audit. The minister is a fool in this realm as in others, but let him know that he need not covet any man's possessions, not even his library or his church or his stipend or his popularity, for, with our limited opportunities and slender resource, we can, under GOD, be wealthy in the spirit of the sacrifice of the Cross.

Robert Murray McCheyne visited in the Holy Land, and William Burns ministered in his absence at Dundee, Scotland. Great spiritual blessing came to the church: it was then McCheyne rejoiced in Burns' gifts and opportunity, without covetousness. Paul lists as one of the sins of the spirit this vice of which we have been speaking and calls it by its true and inward name, idolatry. We are to keep ourselves from it, lest it destroy the bloom or mar the beauty of the duster of graces by the Spirit of GOD. To yield to it is to know suspicion, hatred, sorrow, heartache, and unrest; for which lust of possession there is deterioration of character. We who are marked off for scrutiny in the community must needs live before the world without fault or suspicion in money matters or we are marked down as money-grubbers. Covetousness can sharpen our wits until we become time-servers and live by our wits. And that is the denial of faith. We are shown a more excellent way - the royal law of love!

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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