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## I. LITERARY.

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### AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS.\*

“WILLIAM G. BLAIKIE, EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND”.

It has long been matter of anxious thought to me whether in my lectures on Pastoral Theology, I might not do something to bring the subject of experimental religion under the notice of fourth year's students. It is certain that one of the most vital, delicate, and difficult of the duties which you may have by and by to perform, will be to guide the more earnest and spiritual of your people in the ways of holy living and dying; to encourage in them the habit of personal communion with God; to show them how such communion may be maintained, and how it may be lost; and to bring under their notice such books, ancient and modern, as are most useful for that end. The question has often presented itself to me, Ought not a course of Pastoral Theology to provide some guidance, or at least furnish some hints, on this vital subject? But I have usually dismissed the question with the thought, It is not a subject for lectures. Even if I were so familiar with it myself as to believe that I could teach it (of which I have great doubts), of what use would that be, seeing that if men do not learn it from their own experience, it is vain to dream of their learning it from the instructions of another? Nay, might it not be a snare to them, making them think they know the whole when they only know some of its signs or formula? Of all things to be deprecated, in connection with the pulpit, the worst is, preachers inculcating an experience which is not their own. Would not this be a probable, or at least a possible, result of a course of lectures on the life of the soul? But as often as the question has been dismissed in that form, it has come up in another. Without lecturing on it, might not one

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## OUR LORD'S WARNING AGAINST COVETOUSNESS.

REV. J. F. CANNON, D. D.

On one occasion when our Lord was speaking to a great multitude of people upon high spiritual themes, a certain man approached him with this request: "Master speak to my brother that he divide the inheritance with me." A controversy was thus discovered over the division of a patrimony. We have no means of deciding which party was in the right. But evidently this man felt defrauded, and believed the right was on his side. And now as he witnessed the transparent honesty of Jesus, the authority with which he spake, and the attention which he commanded from the multitude, he determined to secure him as arbitrator in the case. Our Lord promptly declined to act in any such character. There were laws regulating all these matters, and officers to whom the administration of these laws was entrusted; it was no part of his mission to intermeddle with them. But, from the abrupt, not to say impertinent manner in which the man had thrust the case upon his attention, he saw that his heart was too much set upon the inheritance. He was more interested in the mammon of unrighteousness than in the true riches. Hence, the Master took advantage of the occasion to utter this solemn warning: "Take heed and beware of covetousness"; and he then spake a parable illustrating the sin and enforcing the warning. The word which is here translated covetousness means, according to its derivation, a desire after more, or a grasping after more. It must be remembered, however, that there is a desire for gain which is legitimate. It is the life of trade—the mainspring of business activity. It becomes covetousness only when it grows to be excessive or selfish, when it seeks to be gratified at the expense of others, or in disregard of other and higher interests. When, as in the instance before us, it becomes the absorbing passion and prefers the earthly and temporal above the spiritual and eternal. This is the affection against which our Lord utters such a solemn and emphatic word of warning.

I. The warning is justified, first, by the *insidious character* of the sin. It is a sin which steals upon men unawares, and to a marvelous degree blinds their eyes to its own existence. Most people think of it as one sin of which they are in no danger, and against which they do not need to be warned.

Albeit they are at no loss to point to others for whom such warning is appropriate and timely. Some think of it only as the sin of the miser, the man who loves money for its own sake, and hoards it at the cost of pinching self-denial simply for the satisfaction or having it. But the spendthrift may be as truly covetous as the miser. The open-handed man may be as covetous as the stingy one. It all depends upon the spirit and purpose of his open-handedness. Others make a mistake in considering it a sin peculiar to the rich; and the Scriptures do repeatedly warn the rich that they are in special danger of coming under its power. "Excess of wealth is cause of covetousness." But it is not the only cause, and the sin is peculiar to no class. Many a beggar is more covetous than the rich man at whose door he begs. The late Archbishop Hughes has been quoted as saying that during his life as a Catholic priest he received the confessions of near 40,000 people—representing of course all classes of society—and that he had heard almost every conceivable form of sin confessed, but never from any human being the sin of covetousness. Not because many were not guilty of it, for unquestionably it is one of the most common sins, nor because they would intentionally cover it up, but because through a misconception of its character, or ignorance of themselves, they were unconscious of it. It is, as some one has said, "a sin of honest birth," and we may add, of most respectable connections. It is usually born of forethought, or an affectionate concern for the welfare of others. It is closely allied to industry and economy—virtues not only allowed but inculcated by our holy religion. In such company, and under such disguise, covetousness is wont to spring up in the soul, and by almost imperceptible steps acquire dominion over it, as sometimes the poisonous toad-stool springs up hard by the excellent mushroom, and with such a close resemblance to it, that its deadly character is not discerned. Again, covetousness is a sin of the heart, and its presence may not be betrayed by any outward signs in the character of life. As Trench says: "Love of the world may keep itself within the limits of decency and legality, and yet take all of the affections of the heart from God, and rob divine things of all their interest." It is to the character what an inward rottenness is to a tree; the exterior may look fair and sound, while the heart has been eaten away and only the shell of a tree remains. A covetous heart may be masked under an outward character not only of apparent

integrity, but even of sanctity. The Pharisees of our Lord's day were, so far as externals went, the best and most religious people of their time, yet the finger of inspiration points to this as one of their besetting sins. "The Pharisees who were *covetous*, derided him." They made long prayers, enlarged their phylacteries, occupied the chief seats in the Synagogue, and *devoured widows' houses*.

II. Our Lord's warning is further justified by the *heinous character* of the sin. He who thinks of covetousness as a venial offense is surely out of sympathy with God's mind in the matter. The Scriptures always put it in bad company, and rank it among the very worst sins of which men are guilty. One of the commandments of the law is aimed specifically against it. The Saviour gives it a prominent place in his catalogue of the evils which proceed out of a depraved heart; classing it with "Adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, lasciviousness, blasphemy," etc. Paul likewise mentions the covetous man along with the whore-monger, and unclean person as having no inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ. Eph. 5:5. In his Second Letter to Timothy he gives to covetousness the second place among those sins which are characteristic of the "perilous times" in the "last days." If we seek the reason for this bad eminence, it is found in his definition or analysis of the sin. Covetousness, he says, is idolatry. The covetous man is an idolator. He gives the supreme place in his heart to the world, in some form or other. He worships and serves the creature more than the Creator. His sin is simply a renunciation of God, a breach of that first supreme commandment "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," as well as of the last which says "Thou shalt not covet." He breaks both tables of the law at a stroke. In the light of this representation, we may not doubt that in this Christian land of ours, and even in our houses of worship men and women are found who, in God's sight, are as truly idolaters as the African who bows down to his fetich or the Chinaman who bows down before his graven image. They are worshippers at the shrine of Mammon, and are given body and soul to his service. Stocks and bonds, houses and lots, clothing and jewels, furniture and equipage, and such like things, are the objects to which the real homage of their hearts is given. Not only so, but covetousness is likewise the fruitful source of all other forms of sin. It is a multifarious evil—like the fabled hydra with its many

destructive heads. "The love of money," says Paul, "is a root of all kinds of evil." Again "They that will be rich, fall into temptation and a snare, and into *many* foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition." 1 Tim. 6: 9-10. History gives sad confirmation of these statements. It may be doubted if any other passion of the human heart has been such a prolific source of evil; if any has been so disastrous in its effects upon the human character, or has wrought such desolation in society. Many of the foulest crimes that history records, have been inspired by covetousness. It was his love of money, let us not forget, which led Judas Iscariot to betray his Lord with a kiss. He stands as a warning to all the ages against this master-passion. What it did for Judas, it has done for thousands. It has led men to sell their honor, women to sell their purity, officers of state to betray their high trusts, ministers of state to prostitute their holy office, and multitudes to throw upon the market as common merchandise, interests and trusts so sacred as to be above all price. It has broken the most hallowed earthly ties. As in the instance before us, it has made strife between brethren. Those who have been nursed at the same breast, and rocked in the same cradle have been estranged for life through covetousness. It has turned the hearts of fathers against their children, and the hearts of children against their fathers. It has separated husbands and wives. Those whom God has joined together, it has often put asunder. It has arrayed different classes of society against each other. It causes the rich to neglect or oppress the poor; it inflames the poor with envy and hatred against the rich. It is the real force which animates those ominous movements which to-day in every civilized country on the face of the earth are threatening the very existence of social order. It has caused wars and rumors of wars. It has led nation to rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. It has shipwrecked governments, and deluged states with fire and blood. Seldom has it been more potent for evil than it has in this 19th century and in this western world. Its blighting influence is felt in every department of our life as a people. It is plainly one of the dominant forces in the political world, and is fast making the politics of our country a stench in the nostrils of every decent man. It has crept into social life, and society in the technical sense of that word is becoming the very hollowest of

shams. It has permeated commercial life to such an extent that business in many departments at least has become a huge system of cannibalism, the strong devouring the weak, the fortunes of a few being built upon the ruins of others. If we would know what havoc it is playing in American society, we have but to look through the columns of any secular paper and see how large a proportion of the multitude of crimes which it reports, have been prompted by love of money.

It is responsible not only for thefts, burglaries, train-robberies, train-wreckings, child-stealing, and other crimes of this character, but also for a vast number of homicides of every grade. It has caused fratricide, parricide, uxoricide, infanticide, suicide, and every other form of murder that was ever perpetrated by human hands. It has led men to steal the dead bodies of their fellows and make merchandise of them. It has endowed them with a hellish inventiveness, so that they have devised new crimes, for which new names must be coined. "Mammon the least erected spirit that fell from heaven" degrades his votaries as few other masters do. But worst of all, covetousness has invaded the church of God. The Apostle's exhortation "let it not be once named among you as becometh saints" has not been heeded. The evidence is only too convincing that it has stolen into the hearts of Christ's followers, sapping their spirituality, destroying their relish for divine things, hindering their liberality, leading them into lives of self-indulgence and luxury, and inciting them to efforts after making "a fair show in the flesh," forgetful of their-calling as followers of one who had not where to lay his head, and who, "although he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor that we through his poverty might be made rich." Is it too much to say that this is the cause above all others which stands in the way of the church's progress, and clogs the chariot wheels of the coming King? Surely then our divine Lord spoke wisely and well when he uttered this solemn warning "Take heed and beware of covetousness."

III. But not only has he warned his people against the sin, through his teaching he has sought to secure them against it. He has devised means for so securing them, and his example in this respect may profitably engage our attention. *First*, (a) he lays down a creed which embodies a correct view of life. "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." The world's creed is that it *does*; that

the size of a man's fortune is the gauge of his success. That is the creed by which the multitude are living, and in which their children are being indoctrinated. It is a monstrous heresy, demoralizing and degrading in its tendency. The man who lives by it will continually go downward. Hence Christ brands it as false, and asserts the opposite as the truth. "A man's life does *not* consist in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Neither the success of life nor its enjoyment, nor its nobility is to be measured by the extent of one's accumulations. The man who comes to the close of life rich in this world's goods but not rich toward God, according to Jesus Christ, dies the death of a fool. His life has been a hideous failure and a mausoleum as lasting as the hills will not redeem it from failure. On the other hand, the man who dies so poor in this world's goods that like his Lord he must lie in a borrowed tomb, but rich in faith and good works, has achieved success. This is the first truth which our Lord impresses upon the hearts of his hearers. It is a truth which this generation sorely needs to learn, and which we should especially seek to engrave upon the hearts of the young.

(b) Again, he teaches his people to regard themselves as *stewards*, holding all that they have as a trust from him to be used according to his will for the glory of his name. This idea of stewardship—how often he inculcates it, and how solemnly! The man in the succeeding parable ignored his stewardship. He laid up treasure for himself. He spoke of *my* barns, *my* fruits, and *my* goods. The language of a proprietor, not of a steward. The same mistake was made by those husbandmen to whom a certain man let out his vineyard, while he went into a far country. They got to thinking that the vineyard was theirs, and all the fruits of it, and when messengers came from the lord of the vineyard to demand his share, they counted it an impertinence, and stoned them and sent them away empty. What preacher has not encountered the same spirit in the modern church? When he comes before the people in his Master's name, and demands from them the Master's portion, there are usually those who will comment upon his sermon as a begging sermon, and, if they do not stone him, will at least pelt him with their criticisms and send him away empty. This idea of stewardship is a divinely appointed safe-guard against covetousness; and it is because that idea has been so largely forgotten among Christians, that so many of them are an easy

prey to the sin. Just in proportion as a man recognizes the fact that he is God's steward, he is protected against an inordinate love of money. Only let him be true to that character, and then his acquisitive, money-getting faculties may be exercised freely and with safety. His earthly business will even become a means of grace.

(c.) Again our Lord has established regular methods in His church through which His people shall own their stewardship, and make suitable returns to Him of what is His own. There never has been a time when the people of God were not required to worship Him with material offerings—offerings of that which had been produced by the sweat of the face. Under the old Dispensation this was conspicuously true. Those who lived under it were carefully trained to honor the Lord with their substance, and with first fruits of all their increase; to "bring an offering" when they came into his courts. Under the New Dispensation, the same requirement is clearly recognized and enforced. In His Sermon on the Mount, Christ classes alms-giving and prayer together, as exercises of the same nature. He gives similar instructions concerning them, and in the same terms promises the blessings of His Father upon a faithful observance of them. He commended the poor widow who cast her two mites into the Treasury, and held her up for the admiration and imitation of His followers in every age. He taught as none had ever done, the golden lesson, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." In the Epistle to the Hebrews it is written, "But to do good and communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." And we find Paul giving the following order to the Church at Corinth, and the Churches of Galatia, after having laid a great and worthy cause upon their hearts: "Upon the first day of the week"—the day when they assembled themselves together for united worship—"let every one of you lay by him in store as God has prospereth him, &c." Now the reason for this requirement is not that the Lord is dependent upon the gifts of His creatures. It is for His people's sake; for the cultivating of their Christian graces, and the perfecting of their characters. He designs that through this exercise they should express, and by expressing, cultivate their sense of gratitude to Him, of dependence upon Him, and obligation to His service, and their love to their fellow men. By a regular and constant outflow of benevolence, He would keep their hearts open and pure and



sweet, which would otherwise be clogged by selfishness and become stagnant and corrupt. In other words it is His wise and gracious provision for protecting His people against the inroads of this insidious, hateful and destructive sin of covetousness. Christian giving when it is systematic and cheerful, and "unto the Lord," supplies a place in the great work of edifying the saints which is not supplied by any other religious exercise. It cultivates a side of the Christian character, which without it, must go uncultivated. The man who sang at the top of his voice "Fly abroad thou mighty gospel," while he kept his eyes closed so as not to see the contribution basket, may have developed his lungs by the exercise, but he certainly developed no Christian grace. He could not secure through lusty singing what he was refusing to seek through cheerful giving. Hence Paul says to the Corinthians concerning this grace of giving "As ye abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge, and in all earnestness, and in your love to us, see that ye abound *in this grace also.*" 2 Cor. 8:7.

Such are some of the features of the great Physician's treatment of the sin of covetousness. The treatment is both curative and preventive, and when accompanied by the Holy Spirit's grace will surely prove effective. May all to whom the cure of souls is entrusted, faithfully follow the Master's own methods.

