

## **A Tale of Two Masters**

**From the Series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe"**

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**Presented to Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ**

**On Date - Sunday, April 25, 2021**

### **Introduction**

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

The words that I just read are from one of the most famous quotes in western literature. It comes from the opening paragraph of the novel, "A Tale of Two Cities" by Charles Dickens. In that novel, Dickens looks at two cities: Paris, France, and London, England. The novel was published in the 1859, but it discusses Europe in the previous century, the late 1700s.



During that time, Europe was going through a transition - Many transitions, actually, but one stood out: Europe was changing from a group of nations led by royalty to nations led by democratic rule.

The transition happened very differently depending on where you were. In England, the transition was relatively peaceful. In France, there was unthinkable violence. There was fighting in the streets. There were massive numbers of executions. Then, after the first round of executions, another group came into power and executed the people who performed the first round of executions.

How could that happen? France and England are separated by only a few miles. Yet, they were very different during that time.

Two entities existing at the same time, but very different. This kind of thing catches our attention. That's why the opening to this Dickens classic is so familiar to so many.

Today, we're going to look at something similar. Two entities existing at the same time, but very, very different.

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe." We're working our way systematically through the Gospel of Matthew. Chapters 5 through 7 make up "The Christian Manifesto". We're in chapter 6, where we're learning about "Best Practices for Followers of Jesus." We've learned that Jesus wants his followers to be effective. So far, we've heard his thoughts about giving, prayer, and fasting.

In our last article, we learned about "Best Practices for Wealth management" - How should we manage our treasure, the things that are valuable to us? In this article, we're going to do something different. Every now and then, it's a good idea to recall why we do things. Maybe you sometimes wonder, "Why does Phil keep reminding us of the series, 'The King and I', and the section, 'The Christian Manifesto', and all that. I'm doing that each week because we are human beings, and human beings learn best by putting things into categories. If I just went through the Gospel According to Matthew, we would learn something important each week. But, if all we saw was a series of disconnected topics, it would be easy to forget a lot of what we learn. Putting things into groups helps people to remember.

However, sometimes as we work our way through books of the Bible, we run into things that stand out. Everything we learn when we open our Bible is important. But some topics are so important, that we can't let them be only one more topic in line with other things. Today we're looking at something so important that we'll give it its own category.

Let's read about it.

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)

Last week, we learned about "Best Practices for Wealth Management". This follows right after that, and it mentions money. So, we could call it "Wealth Management, part 2." That would be fine, and a lot of commentators do something like that. However, we live in a unique time. The Church of Jesus Christ faces challenges today that may be unlike those seen through its history. Because of that, we'll do something different.

So, today we're going to learn about: "A Tale of Two Masters - Jesus reminds us about idolatry." Two masters call us to serve them. They both live at the same time. But, they are very, very different.

Let's find out more. Jesus starts by saying: "No one can serve two masters. (Matthew 6:24)" Let's go all the way back to our fundamental assumption as we've been studying the book of Matthew. Matthew has met the King of the Universe, Jesus Christ. He wants all his friends to know this great King. His closest friends are members of the Jewish faith who lived with him in Israel.

Jesus, at this time is speaking primarily to this group: The Jewish nation. In doing that, he could work on the assumption that they know some things. They know the Scriptures: Writings that they call “The Law and the Prophets”.

## Joshua

So, they likely knew about a man named Joshua. Joshua was next in line after Moses. Moses led the Jewish people out of Egypt - A nation steeped in the worship of false gods. Joshua was tasked with leading the Jewish nation into the promised land after the death of Moses. He did just that- And, it wasn't easy. The people who lived there and in the surrounding nations were also steeped in the worship of false gods.

God, the true God, showed his power to the Jewish nation on numerous occasions. But, even after all they had seen, many of Joshua's friends weren't sure which god they wanted to follow. After spending his whole life in faithful service to God, and after doing what he was told, he called the leaders of the Jewish nation together.

Here's what he said to them:

14 “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:14-15)”

Look at those words: “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

This is something I've spoken about on a number of occasions. Followers of Jesus refer it idolatry. It's a core message of the Bible. There is one true God – the maker of the heavens and the earth. He calls us to serve him. He wants to be our master. In fact, the word that we translate as “Lord” can also be translated as “master”.

Then there are other entities. Other voices. Other gods (with a small 'g'). The other voices, the other gods, want us to serve them as well. They want to be our master.

You can look at this topic in a number of ways. Today, we'll look at the aspect that Jesus highlights. You can not serve two of these entities at the same time. ***You must choose.***

So, let's compare these choices. Let's compare the gods who call for our allegiance. Let's continue to tell the tale of two Masters.

## I. The God of truth vs. the god of lies and confusion.

Here's the first thing we see as we compare these gods, these beings who want to be our master: One is a voice of truth. The other is a voice of lies.

When we tell this story, we can't help but look at the Garden of Eden. Now, because I've spoken on this a lot, we'll just hit the high points and move on. If this is new to you, contact me, and I'll tell you where to go to see where we've discussed the topic in more detail. There will be some helpful links at the end of this article.

We're told that, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). Soon after creating the whole universe, God creates a beautiful garden and places the first humans in it. The humans are free to do a lot of things. There is only one restriction: The humans can eat fruit from any tree in the garden - Except for one tree: The tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

This involves a very important principle: God gave the first humans a **command** – a rule. He expressed that rule using **words**. When we obey his commands, we serve him.

Here's a second principle: When God talks to us, his words are true. Jesus says, "Your word is truth. (John 17:17)"

But, as many of you know, another voice entered the garden - The serpent. Again, we've spent a lot of time on this, so I won't rehash it right now. You can sum up what the serpent had to say in two sentences: "There is a good reason to disobey God - Listen to me instead."

Now, remember our principle. When you obey the commands of God, you serve him. So, what does it mean when we obey other voices? We serve **them**. So, the serpent might as well have said: There is a good reason to disobey God - **Serve** me instead.

Tight away, you see a problem: The serpent, when he entered the garden had a goal. He wanted Adam and Eve to serve him. He wasn't up front about that. He was deceptive. In other words, he lied.

The serpent represents the Devil, the enemy of humankind. Here's what Jesus said about him: "When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)"

So, we see here the first comparison of the two masters: One is a voice of truth, the other a voice of lies.

## **II. The God of Life vs. the god of Death**

The next comparison we see is this: We see the God of life vs. the god of Death.

In order to understand this, we need to look more closely at the command the God gave to Adam and Eve in the garden.

16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

"You will certainly die." Why would God say this? Because he wanted Adam and Eve to live! God just created a whole planet of beauty and perfection. He gave it to the first humans as a gift. God wanted humans to live and enjoy all the wonderful things he had planned for them. That's still true today.

So, what does it mean that the Serpent came and lied about this? Answer: The serpent wanted Adam and Eve to die.

Here's something else Jesus said about our enemy, the Devil: "He was a murderer from the beginning... (John 8:44)" Jesus makes that statement right before telling us what a liar the Devil is.

So we see the next comparison in this Tale of Two Masters": The God of life vs. the god of death.

Now, we could do this for a long time. We're learning about: The God of Truth vs. the god of lies. The God of life vs. the god of death. We could also discuss: The God of love vs. the god of hate. The God of good vs. the god of evil. The God of healing vs. the god of harm.

The list goes on. But at this point, having understood all this, Jesus now moves to a vital truth for his followers. This is a monumental point in history. There is going to be a shift.

What is that?

## **III. One of the Masters Takes On a New Appearance**

One of the masters now takes on a new appearance. He hasn't changed really. But from this point forward, he will look different.

Let's read:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)

To understand this, once again we have to work on the assumption that the people who were listening to Jesus were trained in the Scripture. They knew about the problem of idolatry. They knew all about people setting up statues and worshipping the statues. As we said earlier this goes all the way back before the time of Moses and Joshua. It was still true in the days of Jesus. They were still surrounded by people who worshipped statues.

The prophet Isaiah described the problem well. He did this in chapter 44 of his book. It's a long passage, so I'll summarize.

Isaiah describes the process of making an idol. He says someone takes a block of wood. They pull out their chisel and carve out a statue. Then, they worship the statue.

Right away, you've got a problem: Isaiah asks this question, does a block of wood change into something magical just because you carve on it? The answer is no. And Isaiah suggests that this should be obvious to anyone.

Now, as if this isn't obvious enough, Isaiah then extends the illustration. He says, imagine that some wood is left over. The same person who carved out the statue then lights the leftover wood and uses it to make dinner. So, one piece of wood becomes a god, with another piece of the same block, this person is cooking a hot dog on a stick. While still holding his hot dog on a stick, the person says, "You are my god – save me!" That's an impossible situation. Again, to Isaiah, this should have been obvious to any thinking person.

And so, it was thought to be obvious to Jews living in Israel at the time of Christ. If someone had reached the point where they wanted to be a follower of Jesus, they would have no trouble with this principle.

But Jesus knew there would be something more. There would be different challenges for his followers. ***The gods would take a different form*** - a different appearance.

"You cannot serve both God and money."

Jesus warned that the gods would never leave - They would just become abstract.

In the old days, people worshipped and served the idols, the statues, because they believed the idols would give them things. I call this statues and stuff. People worship the statues, and the statues give them stuff. Over the course of time people would figure out that statues don't give you anything. ***So, people began to worship the stuff.***

People wanted all kinds of things from statues. Eventually though, money symbolized all the things you might want. So, Jesus warns us to be on the alert. You cannot serve both God and money.

### **III. Application**

At this point, we need to ask, what does this look like? What does it look like to attempt to serve God and money?

Some of the things we'll discuss at this point will sound familiar. In our last article, Jesus told us about storing up treasure in heaven. On earth we have what are often called "The Three 'T's".  
- Time, Talents, and Treasures All of us have these things.

Here's an important question: ***What do you use yours for?*** Do you use them to serve God? Or do you use them exclusively to get things for yourself?

Jesus focusses on money. So, let's look at some examples based on that.

### **Giving**

Let's look at the topic of giving. To do that, we'll consider Abraham, the father of faith. One day, Abraham met a man named Melchizedek. Let's read about it:

18 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, 19 and he blessed Abram, saying,  
"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
20 And praise be to God Most High,  
who delivered your enemies into your hand."  
Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Genesis 14:18-20)

So, here's Abraham. God blessed Abraham. He blessed Abraham with wealth. He blessed Abraham with military victory over his enemies. So, when Abraham met a priest of the most high God, he wanted to express his thanks. That made him give a tenth of what he had.

Many times, people who want to show thanks to God want to know how much they should give. This passage, and others, suggest one tenth. Today, we call this a tithe.

## **The Tithe**

There are two important things to know about the tithe. First, we live in an age of grace. No amount of money purchases God's love. No amount of money pays for our sins. Abraham gave totally out of thanks to God. That's how we encourage people to give.

One of the most famous quotes from the apostle Paul is this:

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (II Corinthians 9:6-7)

Look at that: "God loves a cheerful giver." God commands us to give. The amount that you give is between you and God. Some people don't stop at ten percent - they give even more! But know this: We do not give because we will be punished if we don't. We give because giving is a privilege. When we give, as we said last week, we build treasure in heaven.

That's why we don't talk much about giving in our church. We don't give a sermon every other week demanding more and more and more money from people. Every now and then, the topic comes up, such as now, when we're working our way systematically through a book of the Bible. When it comes up, we discuss it. From there, it's between you and God. That's because we live in an age of grace.

## **Faith**

The next aspect of this is faith. Here's what God tells us in Psalm 23, again, one of the best known in the Bible.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. (Psalm 23:1)

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall lack, what? Nothing! The King James says, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

Money has a pull in our lives for a lot of reasons. One is that we sometimes lack faith in the ability of God to take care of us.

Once again, we need to find a balance. Of course you need a job, and you need to make money to live. Last week, we read the proverb about the ant who works hard and steadily to store up food. So, we're not encouraging laziness here.

On the other hand, are you consumed with the sense that you'll run out if you ever take a break? That's one aspect of faith. God will provide, God will protect.

There's another aspect of faith that we need to address here. This is the faith in God's holy character. My friends, God loves you. In fact, we've said many times that our modern word "love" doesn't really catch the full meaning of God's love. In fact, God **cherishes** you.

That's why he takes care of you - because he loves you.

Some people aren't so sure of that. Because they aren't so sure, their lives are one big attempt to find love. Sometimes there are things that look like love, but which are terrible imitations.

Sometimes people think they need a flashy car. That flashy car makes people look. Sometimes the owners know the look is envy, and they like it. But deep down, what they're really looking for is love. And that's the case with big homes, beautiful clothing, and a host of other possessions. I could give that whole sermon!

Do you believe that God loves you? If you don't, you may find yourself working and working and working trying to buy things that impress others.

## **Rest**

One place this really takes a toll is the rest that God offers to his followers - The Sabbath. We don't look at the Sabbath today the same way people did in the Old Testament, but it's still very important. It's important to make the time to rest. It's important to make time to come to church.

We all feel sad for people who have jobs that require work on Sundays - People in the medical field for example. But, I feel sad when people take jobs knowing that they'll have to miss church. When you do that, your bank account may grow, but your soul is impoverished. When we do that, we're letting money be our master.

And remember, this is a tale of two masters: One is the God of life. The other is the god of death.

When we work and work and work and never take the time to rest, our souls die. And our bodies don't do much better. Too much work leads to high blood pressure. High blood pressure leads to heart attacks and strokes. Too much pressure leads to smoking and drinking and injecting and a lot of other bad habits. And the result is tragically predictable: death.

Let's pull this all together.

## **Conclusion**

Today, we've learned a "Tale of Two Masters." Jesus has reminded us about idolatry in the lives of his followers.

There is one God who calls us to serve him. We serve by obeying his commands. He warns us to watch for the "other voices". They want us to serve them instead. The "other voices" have been with us since the garden. They are full of reasons why we should ignore the clear commands of God and listen to them instead.

God, the true God, is Truth. The other so-called gods are the voice of lies.

God is the God of life. The other gods are the voice of death.

Jesus has warned us: In the old days the idols took the form of statues. Today, they are more abstract. Jesus singled out money - It can become a god. It can call us to serve it. But serving money results in death - Death of our souls, and death of our bodies.

Friends, in this "Tale of Two Masters", choose the God of Truth. Choose the God of life. Be on the alert for the other voices, the other Gods.

And remember those great words of Joshua: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."