

# **The Folly of Those Who Serve God But Do Not Want to Serve Him Alone**

**By C. F. W. Walther (Translated by E. Myers)**

**15th Sunday after Trinity, 1850**

Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In our precious Savior, beloved hearers!

That everyone is obliged to serve God is a truth engraved on the hearts of all men with letters, which can never be completely erased. It is true that especially in our generation the number of those increases from day to day who do not want to recognize even this truth. But if these miserable people only admitted it, we would soon see that in their hearts, too, a voice continues to ring which they vainly try to silence, and which is calling to them: "God does exist, and you must serve this God."

As fearfully as the torrent of atheism is roaring today even through Christendom, yet - thank God - not even in our time has it carried everything along with it. There is yet a remnant of people who loudly confess even in our generation by word and deed that they still believe in God and admit their duty to Him. Thank God, there are still millions who are not ashamed to attend services at God's houses zealously every Sunday, to bow their knees to God's holy majesty, to lift up their voices in prayer and praise, and to listen with earnest attention to the word of this King of kings, and Lord of lords. There are yet millions who believe that some day they will have to appear before God's judgment seat in order to give account of their whole lives and to be rewarded according to the deeds done in the body, whether good or evil. These therefore are also afraid to open their mouths against God and to disobey His holy commandments openly.

Do not all of you who have assembled here belong to this number? Of course! If you did not wish to serve God, you would not have appeared today in His house.

But, my friends, while many may still profess, and by words and deeds confess that they owe service to God, that He is their Lord and they are His subjects, servants and maids whom He feeds and employs, experience teaches that while most men may want to serve God, they do not want to serve Him alone.

It is quite obvious that most want to divide their hearts between God and the world. Oh yes, they want God to be their friend. This is just why they serve Him. But they do not want to sacrifice the friendship of the world for His friendship.

They certainly do not want to lose heaven; but they are unable for its sake to renounce the treasures and joys of earth. Oh yes, they do want to secure a good place for their souls in the world to come, but for this reason to renounce a good comfortable life for their bodies here seems too much to them.

Or is this not so? Do not very many think that piety can be carried too far? Do not very many think that Sundays have been appointed for worship, but that on weekdays the working man has no time for it, for then he must take care of work and business matters?

Do not very many think that their one church attendance on Sundays is over and above the reasonable service they owe God, and how could anyone find fault with them if they, like other people, allow themselves a little pleasure during the remaining hours of Sunday?

Do not many say that it is asking too much when they are admonished to serve God always, completely and only? Surely they cannot be expected to spend all day and all night over books or on their knees!

Do not most young people say, including those who do not want to refuse all service to God entirely: Should we spend our youth which we experience but once in mourning?

Do not most businessmen say or at least think: How could we subsist without pleasing the world, and if we offended our customers? Must we not make our living from the world?

Yes, do not most "Christians" think: What is the use of faith in Christ, if we still have to be as concerned about our salvation as some preachers tell us? Why faith, if one must still strive so anxiously for sanctification, be so exacting about every sin, and shut oneself off so completely from the world and its joys?

No, they think it is all right not to forget God entirely and to serve God, too. But to have nothing but God on one's mind every single moment, to serve Him always, completely, only - that is asking too much! Anyone who did this might end up quite peculiar indeed!

In short, most "Christians" think that in the service of God as in everything else there is a middle road, consisting of surrendering oneself entirely neither to the world nor to God, but rather of serving God, yet not being completely indifferent to the joys and treasures of the world. In a word, one should ingeniously combine service to God and service to the world.

Those who follow this principle think they are acting very wisely, that they are steering a blessed middle course between godlessness and fanaticism, and are taking the surest, easiest way to heaven. Could they really be right? Alas, absolutely not! The thought that there is a middle road leading to heaven is an empty dream, and those who comfort themselves by it and stay with it are lost beyond redemption. Among the ways leading to eternity is the middle road - the highway to hell. He who wants to serve God and be saved must serve Him *alone*, or else his entire service is in vain. Christ testifies to this in our Scripture selection for today.

Scripture text: Matthew 6:24-34. *No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought,*

*saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.*

Of all the Scripture texts publicly read and expounded on the Sundays of the entire church year, doubtless the one just read is one of the most earnest and the most stern. It contains a reprimand not to the manifestly godless, but to those who want to be pious, and who because of their piety suppose they deserve not punishment but praise. It does not show that the godless should be converted, but this, that many of those who think they are already converted must first be converted if they want to be saved. Thousands who think they are good Christians are therefore judged and condemned by this Scripture. In short, this Scripture is especially for us who still want to serve God and tells us that we must serve either God alone, or spare God our half-service. Therefore let me now show you

## **THE FOLLY OF THOSE WHO SERVE GOD BUT DO NOT WANT TO SERVE HIM ALONE.**

In the main, there are two reasons for their folly:

1. Because they Attempt to do Something Absolutely Impossible, and
2. Because they also Attempt to do Something Which is Extremely Dangerous.

[Prayer:]

God, Thou art not only our Creator, our Lord, our God, but also the only source of all joy, all bliss. We therefore not only owe service to Thee and Thee only, but we also can be happy only when we serve Thee alone, for to serve Thee and Thee alone is happiness itself. But alas, we must lament and confess to Thee that we are so deeply corrupted and blinded that we are afraid to serve Thee, that we therefore keep wanting to give only half of our hearts to Thee. Therefore Thou wouldest be justified if Thou banished us faithless servants from Thy holy face. But, oh Lord who hast given Thy Son for us, we beseech Thee, have mercy on us for His sake. With the sword of Thy Word sever all cords by which our poor hearts are still bound to the service of the creature, and incline again to Thee our hearts which are turned away from Thee, so we might serve Thee and Thee alone, being happy in Thy service. To that end bless also the present preaching of Thy Word for the sake of Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Mediator. Amen.

### **[1. Those who Serve God but do not Want to Serve Him Alone Attempt to do Something Absolutely Impossible]**

All of you will certainly agree that anyone acts foolishly who attempts to do something which is absolutely impossible. For example, if a man wanted to take two roads at the same time, one leading to the right and the other to the left; one leading upward and forward and at the same time one leading down and backward, surely everyone would think him a fool. Why? Because he is undertaking something impossible.

Now, what if those who serve God but do not want to serve Him alone were doing the same? Would it not be plain that such people were obviously acting foolishly? Without a doubt!

What does Christ say in our Scripture for today? He begins with the noteworthy, plain, unambiguous statement: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

The voice of eternal truth states here clearly and unmistakably: as impossible as it is for a man to sell himself as a slave to two masters at once, and to render both the service due them at once, just as impossible it is to serve both God and another master at the same time.

But is this really so impossible? Are there not thousands upon thousands who manage to combine this very well? Who indeed serve the world, mammon and many sins, yet who do not forget God entirely. Yea, they are all the more diligent in their worship, attend church diligently, come diligently to confession and the Lord's supper, diligently hear and read God's Word, and diligently pray and sing at home.

It is true, my friends, if God were truly served by such outward, so-called religious works, then one could indeed serve God and mammon, Christ, and the world, the Creator and the creature at the same time. But this is false.

When a man does such so-called religious works, he does not really serve God, but rather God serves him. To serve God is something entirely different. To serve God means to surrender ourselves to God, to give Him our love, to give God our reverence, to give God our trust, in short, to give God our hearts.

God shows us what He considers true service in the First Commandment, where He says: "I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2, 3) We are to have God as our God. And what it means to "have God as our God" cannot be expressed more clearly and definitely than expressed by Luther in our Small Catechism in the following words of explanation: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

But God Himself also explained the First Commandment, speaking, for example by wise Solomon: "My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways."

(Proverbs 23:26) Therefore we are to give ourselves, with all we are and have.

Our hearts, *our hearts* we are to give to God. This and this alone is the service God demands of us, and by which alone we can serve Him.

Now, who is wise enough to serve God and besides Him another master at the same time? Not even the wisest man on earth is wise enough to manage this. For this is something absolutely impossible.

Many serve mammon, that is, they seek to become rich, or they place all their trust in earthly possessions and think that they are really secure and able to face the future calmly only when they have amassed a fair amount of capital. Or else they worry about temporal things. Without committing themselves to God's care they ask daily in unbelief: "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Wherewithal shall we be clothed?"

Or, should they lose their earthly property, they are almost inconsolable in their grief.

And yet such people think that because they go diligently to church despite their service to mammon, they nevertheless are serving God. But they deceive themselves.

God demands their hearts. And their hearts with which alone they can serve God they have long since taken from God and given to mammon!

Many another serves the world, that is, he still goes with the world, still takes part in the world's empty pleasures. Or he still courts the favor and friendship of the world. Or he is afraid of the mockery and contempt of the world, and because of his fear he fails to confess his faith, yea, even denies his faith by deed and word.

And yet such suppose that if, despite this service to the world, they diligently hear and read God's Word, they still serve God. But they deceive themselves. God demands their hearts. And their hearts with which alone they can serve God they have taken from God and given to the world!

Finally many openly serve sin, that is, they allow this or that manifest sin to continue to rule over them. One is ruled by ambition, another by envy, anger and irreconcilableness, a third by greed, a fourth by lust, a fifth by vanity, a sixth by drunkenness, a seventh by usury and secret deceit, and yet such suppose that because, despite such service to sin, they still associate with Christians and take part in their worship services and Bible study meetings, they still serve God.

But they deceive themselves.

For God demands their hearts. And their hearts with which alone they can serve God they have long since taken from God and given to sin and thus to the devil.

Oh, all of you who wanted to serve God in the past, but who also served mammon, the world, or a sin, recognize that you have undertaken something utterly impossible. Believe the voice of truth which says so clearly and plainly in our Scripture: "No man, no man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" or any other lord.

As little as it is possible for a soldier to be recruited into the armies of two warring kings and to serve them both; as little as it is possible for a man to sell himself as a slave to two masters, and to serve both at the same time; as little as it is possible for a man to be engaged to two brides and to be faithful to both, so little is it possible for a man to serve God, and at the same time to serve still another lord.

He who does not serve God *alone* does not serve Him at all. His service with half a heart - a divided heart - merely looks like service and there is not service at all.

Everything which such a half-hearted servant of God does, no matter if at times he labors to exhaustion in his sham service of God, is nothing but lost labor for which he cannot expect any reward but that of the soldier who besides serving in his own army also served the enemy: the reward of a *traitor*. Therefore when the nation of Israel once served Jehovah, but also Baal, the prophet Elijah cried out to them in divine fiery zeal: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." (I Kings 18:21)

And once when the bishop of Laodicea also wanted to serve both Christ and the world, the Lord had John write Him: "These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God, I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." (Revelation 3:14-16)

Hear this, all of you who want to serve God but do not want to serve Him alone: This terrible threat of the Lord is directed not only against the bishop of Laodicea, but also against you. If you do not want to be warm and glad in the love of God, you might as well be cold, for God will spew you out of His mouth.

If you want to serve mammon, or the world, or a sin besides God, save yourself the trouble! Leave your service to Him alone, God has no pleasure in it. God does not regard it. He confronts you with the great "Either - Or", saying: "Either be completely mine, Or not mine at all!"

If you want to serve God, well and good! Then serve Him alone!

As the Lord says in our text: "Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness." But count the cost carefully! Do not promise more than you want to keep. If you want to serve God, there must be only one God in your heart, just as there is only one God in heaven. You must decide to tear your heart completely away from mammon, that is, from temporal goods. You must break with the world, and leave the service of sin once and for all. You must come to the point where you have only one real purpose on earth: to live to God's glory and to use all you have to God's glory. Yes, you must come to the point that you renounce forever a calm and comfortable life, in short, the so-called happiness of life, and learn to say with Asaph, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." (Psalm 73:25, 26) You will then be prepared for God's sake gladly to be poor as well as rich, gladly despised as well as honored, gladly sick as well as healthy, gladly dying as well as living. You must learn to say from your innermost heart what our church sings:

*Oh, grant that nothing in my soul  
May dwell but Thy pure love alone!  
Oh, may Thy love possess me whole,  
My joy, my Treasure, and my Crown!  
All coldness from my heart remove;  
My every act, word, thought, be love.  
(TLH, 349, 2.)*

## **[2. Those who Serve God but do not Want to Serve Him Alone Attempt to do Something Extremely Dangerous]**

My friends, now that we have seen that those who want to serve God but not serve Him alone act most foolishly because they attempt to do something *impossible*, let us consider secondly that this is most foolish because they also attempt to do something which is *extremely dangerous*.

Those who do wish to serve God but not to serve Him alone are, of course, so minded because they suppose that if they were to serve God alone, they would have to become very miserable people who could no longer enjoy a single happy hour in this world. But if besides God they served also other things, mammon, the world, sin, they could enjoy the advantages from both services: pleasures from serving this world right now, and salvation from service to God in the world to come.

Alas, how completely different is that which they find from that which they seek! In our Scripture Christ sketches for us a picture of the state of those who want to serve mammon besides God, and shows us how miserable these people are. Constant anxiety for body, life, food and clothing dwells in their heart. Their one constant, anxious question is: "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Wherewithal shall we be clothed?"

It is not enough that they, as everyone, must carry the burden of each day as it comes. They are also willfully preoccupied in advance with the whole heavy burden which the coming days might bring them. They do not own their earthly treasures, their earthly treasures own them. Their possessions do not give them joy but a burden, not delight but vexation. This, however, is the reward of all those who want to serve some other lord besides God.

Such people are much more miserable than those who care nothing for God at all and unashamedly serve the world and sin. Since they want to serve the world and sin, too, they enjoy none of the happiness which a man tastes who serves God alone; and because they still want to serve God and not lose His favor entirely, they spoil for themselves the delight enjoyed by those who serve only the world and sin. The fear of God and His judgment spoils their joy in earthly things, and clinging to earthly things robs them of the comfort of God, His grace and His fellowship.

They hover between heaven and earth. They feel that they are not right with God, and they see that they are suspicious to the world as well. Inside, in their hearts and consciences, they have no peace but unrest, doubt, fear, nor do they find peace in outside things. Above all, such "Christians" halting between two opinions are made very miserable by the thought of death. They can never conquer their fear of it. Their conscience tells them that perhaps their real unhappiness will first begin with death.

And alas, dear friends, if this fear of those who want to serve two masters were unfounded, if at least they could expect a good reward in the world to come for their supposed service which they rendered God, then perhaps they might endure a little misery for their unfaithfulness and half-heartedness on earth. They would still be eternally happy and glad in the end. But the most terrible thing is this: He who does not serve God alone does not serve Him at all. And he who thus does not serve God at all is no Christian at all, is not in the faith, has no grace, dies in his sins, cannot be saved, is lost, his reward is - the punishment of an enemy of God - hell.

Oh you unfortunate man who serves God but also mammon, the world, and this and that sin, who do not serve God *alone*, who do not want to give Him your whole heart, remember, oh remember, how wretched you are.

Here you never have peace of heart, neither in God nor in the world; and there the most horrible fate awaits you. Even if you suppose yourselves Christians because of your half-hearted service to God, you are not, you are no spiritual priests, no children of God. You are not under the covenant of grace of your holy baptism, for you have constantly violated your baptismal covenant by which you renounced the devil and all his works and ways.

Therefore please do not try to combine what cannot be combined. If you do not want to forsake mammon, the world and sin, well and good. Then serve these gods only, and don't make any efforts to serve God too. All such efforts would be vain and lost anyhow. Yes, in them you merely increase your temporal and eternal misery.

But if you want to serve God - and oh, that you would decide to do so! - then serve Him alone. You will never regret it. The only things you lose are misery, unrest, care. You come to the certainty of God's grace, peace and joy here in the Holy Spirit, and in eternity the eternal reward of grace which God promised His faithful servants awaits you. Oh dare take the bold leap, serve notice on all other masters once and for all, and say with the old song:

*My heart, make your decision,  
Dare do it in the end,  
For sin have but derision,  
Its pleasures but offend.  
Awake! Cast off forever  
The old man, mammon flee  
Put on Christ now, and never  
Without His peace you'll be.*

But, dear ones, before I close, I must mention one more thing so that no one who admits that I am right might yet be deceived and lose his eternal salvation. For let no one think that by saying: All right, from now on I will serve God alone, he has done all that is needed.

Alas, countless numbers have done this very thing and yet were lost. For they wanted to serve God in their own strength. They thought that if they could make good resolutions, they could also carry them out. But behold, within a short time their warmed and kindled hearts were cold again. They fell back again into the service of *mammon*, the world and sin, and were lost in the end.

Therefore, dear listener, if from now on you truly want to serve God alone and want to be truly saved, you must follow the order made by God for this purpose. First, you must try to come to a real, living knowledge, by the word of God, of how poor, miserable, lost a sinner and how unfaithful a servant you have been up to now.

You must pray without ceasing to God to give you this knowledge. If you do this honestly, God will also hear you. God will give you His Holy Spirit, and He - the Holy Spirit - will give you divine light so that you will see clearly and plainly and in terror your unsuspected ruin and misery, and you will bitterly and honestly bewail it.

But do not stop there. Then, when your sins lie heavy on your heart, you must also flee to Christ, the Savior of sinners. In His blood and death, in His grace and His merit you must then seek comfort and peace through faith. You must then make the gracious promises of



the Gospel your own, and then live, fight, suffer and die completely in Christ and in His Word.

Oh, if you will do this, then you will no longer want to serve both God and mammon.

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Christ and the world, divine grace and sin. Then you will gladly surrender yourself body and soul, your whole heart and all you are and have, to your God and Savior alone.

Already here on earth you will find in Him unutterable blessedness, to enjoy it forever in eternity. For when the Sun of divine grace arises in a man's heart, all the flickering, changing stars of the lust of sin and the world set before its glory. A bright, glad morning of grace and peace follows here, and in the world to come an eternal day of an indescribably happy life. Amen.