

MAMMON - a roadblock to eternal life - Robert Fitt.

When we think of the word welfare we often think of “charity”, or “giving to the poor”. The dictionary says that it means to “do well” or “Prosper”; but the welfare handbook gives the word ‘welfare’ a surprising new twist. The handbook tells us that welfare has to do with both *our “temporal and spiritual well-being.”* It helps us temporarily, with food, clothing, housing, social relationships, emotional well-being, and so on; and—even better—it helps us to develop permanent spiritual roots as we draw near to God. Our faith, our prayers, sincere fasting, a generous fast offering, our scripture study...our service. To further emphasize that welfare goes far beyond the concerns of the world and focuses on the Spirit as well, the handbook definition continues this way: *“As we apply welfare principles in our lives, we become more like God...and Christ, and we prepare ourselves to live with them eternally”* (*Providing in the Lord’s Way, p. 3*). And that, in the end, is what welfare is all about -- preparing to live with God. It is our schoolmaster for learning to live on a celestial level. It teaches us how to use the gifts that God has given us to bless others.

But sometimes the very things we *have* get in the way of our well being. Does that seem strange? Let’s discuss it in depth, shall we? Let me begin with this example.

It was winter in Salt Lake; but I was warm and comfortable, for my wife and I had managed to find ourselves a soft seat in the audience of the Pioneer Theater. It was a magnificent show. The script was great, the actors wonderful, and the stage set was the finest I had ever seen. I was particularly impressed by a large equestrian statue that presided in the middle of the town square. As the play progressed, tears of sadness formed in my eyes; but before I could dry them, they began again, as I was suddenly overcome by gales of laughter. The play was an emotional sellout!

As the last line was spoken and the curtain dropped, I felt overwhelmed by the feelings and emotions evoked by the drama. I rushed to the stage to congratulate the cast, and to take a closer look at scenery that looked so real

that you could move in your furniture and live there. What I saw deflated my expectations. The magnificent statue was not bronze at all; but was roughly cut from styrofoam and sprayed with bronze paint; The palace walls were not built of stone; but were muslin and poster paint, held in the back by old wooden braces, and weighted down with sandbags; The grand drape in the throne room was not ancient lace; but cheesecloth, sprayed with pastel glue and a fleck or two of glitter.

It was all fake. All of it. And it had *seemed* so real!

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It was autumn in Japan. Two hard-working missionaries walked slowly from a long day's tracting. It was a quiet night. With no one else in sight, it was a good time for meditation; and so Steve dropped back from his companion and was quickly lost in thought. As he walked he observed the city - sidewalks, guard rails, buildings, trees, signs and lamp posts - all in a style common to Japan. He pondered how different they were from those at home.

Home!

As the word formed in his mind, he said: "I felt an overwhelming conviction that the world is not my home; but that my home is in another place with the family of Father in Heaven; and that the earth is just a brief stop-over."

The thought stopped Steve in his tracks, and he closed his eyes to experience the special feelings that encompassed him. He felt a calm, sweet peace. When he opened his eyes again, they opened to different world. He blinked, he stared, he closed his eyes and turned away, but to no avail - for everything within his sight had changed—transformed. The buildings, the lamp posts . . . all of it was phony. They were deceptions—stage props—objects painted on cardboard or carved in styrofoam, and held up by wooden braces in the back. Stunned, he looked hard, again and again. But nothing changed –

"It was all fake. All of it. And it had *seemed* so real!"

As Steve contemplated the turn of events, he asked himself: "What, then, *is* real?" And as he mulled the question over and over, the dew from heaven gently distilled pure intelligence to his soul. In the quiet of that moment he came to know:

1. That each of us was sent to earth by a loving Father with a role to play. A role that would lift and bless others and draw them back home to God.

That each of us learned our role in the preexistence; but, knowing of the forgetfulness that would come, God provided a prompter to help us when we momentarily forgot our lines. The Holy Spirit is that prompter. If we are obedient to his promptings, we will always know the righteous thing to say and do; but because there must be opposition in all things, an alert performer is acutely aware that there are actually two prompters. Besides the Holy Spirit, the evil one is there, straining to entice the actor to lay aside the script and ad lib...in dangerous, even damning ways.

2. Steven was further made to understand that the houses, and cars and clothes, the boats and skis—and all the rest—are just props. They have no eternal reality, except as a means to prove us. To see whether we will use this world's goods to bless and strengthen others as the Spirit directs; or whether we will give-in to the enticements of Satan and lavish our riches on our own selfish pleasures and passions.
3. It is interesting to note that the props—(the things of the world) — themselves are neither good nor bad, they are neutral. Satan is free to use them to entice us away from our God-given role, so that we—in our greed—begin to worship the props in the place of God. While God will entice us to use them to help and bless others, to share our abundance freely.

After pondering all these things, Steven realized something that he had never supposed. With a quiet finality, he said:

"I knew, then, what life in this world is all about. I am the star in my own little play. I must choose for myself how I will play my part. I can choose to accept the important role that my Father in Heaven has given me to play; or I can allow myself to be lured away, instead, by the popularity, pride, lust and riches of the world. I must decide this for myself; and the decision I make will have eternal consequences for good or for evil."

May I paraphrase a statement quoted by Yul Brynner as he concluded the Television show "The Entertainers":

"I am born alone, I live alone and I die alone. Any loving relationships that I have in my life, or any possessions that I gain, are not mine at all - they never were - they belong to God. I am grateful that He loaned them to me for a time."

And so it is. All the world's goods belonged to God from the very beginning. He loaned them to us for the duration of the play; but it has been proven, over time, that no man ever leaves the stage of life without, first, returning all his props to the stage manager.

It is clear, then, that there are two essential things that we must look to if we are to be diligent, yet joyful, in fulfilling the role that our Father in Heaven has given us to play while here in mortal life:

- The First is that we must Love God with all our heart, might mind and strength. Willingly keeping the commandments he has given us.
- And, second, we must "love our neighbor as ourselves. Treating one another with kindness, "long-suffering, gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned" (DC 121: 41-42). In short, we must place the needs of others ahead of our own.

All the rest is vanity.

I think that it is instructive to read that some events that relate to judgment day will be very entertaining; for it appears that everyone will be allowed to watch a video of everyone else's play. It will all be there for everyone to see. It will be as though every detail of our lives was "spoken from the housetops, and [our] secret acts...revealed" (DC 1:3). Only the evils for which we have fully repented will remain on the cutting room floor.

Now, what does all this mean? It helps us understand several things:

- First, it teaches that the things that we gather around us are unimportant except as a way to prove to the Lord what it is that we truly worship. If we use the props for the benefit of others, as prompted by the Holy Spirit, we worship the Savior; If we use them for any other purpose, we worship another god....whatever that God may be.

Consider what President Spencer W. Kimball said:

"The brethren constantly cry out against that which is intolerable in the sight of the Lord: against pollution of mind, body, and our surroundings; against vulgarity, stealing, lying, pride, and blasphemy; against fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and all other abuses of the sacred power to create; against murder and all that is like unto it; against all manner of desecration.

That such a cry should be necessary among a people so blessed is amazing to me. And that such things should be found even among the Saints to some degree is scarcely believable, for these are a people who are in possession of many gifts of the Spirit, who have knowledge that puts the eternities into perspective, who have been shown the way to eternal life.

Sadly, however, we find that to be shown the way is not necessarily to walk in it, and many have not been able to continue the faith. These have submitted themselves in one degree or another to the enticings of Satan and his servants and joined with those of "the world" in lives of ever-deepening idolatry.

[President Kimball continues] "I use the word idolatry intentionally. As I study the ancient scripture, I am more and more convinced that there is a significance in the fact that the commandment "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" is the first of the Ten Commandments."

Few men have ever knowingly and deliberately chosen to reject God and his blessings. Rather, we learn from the scriptures that because the exercise of faith has always appeared to be more difficult than relying on things more immediately at hand, carnal man has tended to transfer his trust in God to material things. Therefore, in all ages when men have fallen under the power of Satan and lost the faith, they have put in its place a hope in the "arm of flesh" and in the "gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, or hear, nor know" (Dan 5:23) - that is, in idols. This I find to be a dominant theme in the old testament. [And here I want you to pay particular attention]: "Whatever thing a man sets his heart and his trust in most is his god; and if his god doesn't also happen to be the true and living God of Israel, that man is living in idolatry." Spencer

W. Kimball, The False Gods we Worship, The Ensign, June 1976)

- Second, it teaches us that the things that many of us spend the bulk of our time doing are of less importance than we may think. Even our daily work is not meaningful, in an eternal sense, except to support our families while we serve the Lord. Any jockeying for position or power within the company

or corporation, or any desire for prestige and the honors of men, then, become less than desirable. Though it is not always as easy as that, for God wishes some of us have wealth, prestige and power to promote His purposes.

- Any job that is honorable, and that contributes to society is as important as any other job. The artificial divisions that now occur are not from God, who, instead, desires equality.

Hugh Nibley teaches an important lesson. He demonstrates clearly that the four most powerful tools that Satan uses against us are:

- The desire for riches—greed—including a fetish for gathering around us the things of the world.
- The desire for power/control - unrighteous dominion,
- The desire to be popular, often at any cost,
- The lusts of the flesh; our passion for ease, pleasure and comfort.

He then points out that those same four things have become the measuring rod for success in the world. If we have these four things—money, power, popularity and access to the lusts of the world—we are considered successful by the world's standards. But as Nephi points out, they are the very things that will lead us to destruction if they become our gods. (1 Nephi 22:23{

Now, I ask you to consider your life -- the way that you live every day -- in light of what has been said.

What is of the most importance in your life? We all give our lives to something. Think a moment. What do you give your money, time, energy and attention to?

- Is it organized sports? Does the sports page get more time and attention than the scriptures do? (And more interest and enthusiasm?)
- Is it money? Is seeking for riches high on your list of priorities? (You've seen the bumper sticker, haven't you? "He who dies with the most toys - wins!")

- Is it intellect? Has your mind become more important than the Spirit? Do you decide for yourself what you will do, based upon logic and reason, Rather than doing as Christ would have you do?
- Do you worship the outdoors? Has travel, or the wilderness displaced the need to be productive at home and in the Church?
- Is it comfort and pleasure? Does the television set, Ipad, recreational reading, and fun-and-games consume too much of your time?
- Or do you give your time, money and energy in the interest of others, seeking to find ways to bless those who cross your path?

There are many who use their time and means to help others. They do it because they feel the spirit of it, and love to do it. To them, the following quotation written by William Saroyan, will have a special meaning. I discovered it in his book The Human Comedy. In it, a mother is giving guidance to a son who is leaving home for the first time:

"You must remember", she said, "always to give of everything you have. You must give foolishly even. You must be extravagant. You must give to all who come into your life. Then nothing and no one shall have the power to cheat you of anything, for if you give to a thief, he cannot steal from you, and he himself is then no longer a thief. And the more you give—the more you will have to give."

With that in mind, review again, in your mind, the things you spend your life doing.

Many wonder about that, and ask: "How can I know?" In answer, there are a few questions that will help you see more clearly what it is that you worship. As I ask each question, please repeat it in your mind, and answer it in your heart. (No hands please! Save your confessions for the Bishop.)

- What is it that gets your adrenaline going, that gets you excited, that stirs you up to action?
- Is it the telestial level of living - greed, power, popularity, or the lusts of the flesh?
- Is it the terrestrial level of living - the intellectual pursuit of logic and

reason? The desire to "be your own man" free to make your own decisions apart from all other influences?

- Is it the celestial level of living - striving to be obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as they come to you?

Please note what the Spirit is telling you.

The second question: All of us have some free time that only we control. What do you do with yours? Listen for the promptings as you consider this....

Now, as an example, just consider your last important purchase.

What was your motive for buying it?

- Was it to impress the neighbors?
- Was it for your personal excitement, comfort and convenience?
- Was it to bless the lives of others?
- Was it to increase your popularity or power?
- Was it to make you more appealing to the opposite sex?
- Was it so that you could better serve God?

What is the Spirit telling you now?

President Spencer W. Kimball touched on this tender topic when he said:

"Many people spend most of their time working in the service of a self-image that includes sufficient money, stocks, bonds, investment portfolios, property, credit cards, furnishings, automobiles, and the like to guarantee carnal security throughout, it is hoped, a long and happy life. Forgotten is the fact that our assignment is to use these many resources in our families and quorums to build up the kingdom of God - to further the missionary effort and the genealogical and temple work; to raise our children up as fruitful servants unto the Lord; to bless others in every way."

(Spencer W. Kimball, The False Gods we Worship, The Ensign, June 1976)

While thinking of this topic, one day, I penned the following words:

WHEN MAMMON GRASPS THE HEART

by Robert Fitt

"Are you happy?"

A wise man once inquired of me.

I paused, nonplussed...
Then looked around uneasily,
Hitched up my voice
And in a tone both soft and meek
I said: "Happy? "Well...no,
But that's a goal I seek."

"Is happiness a goal?"
His query softly asked..."or a path
to travel on?"
This inquiry, unnerved me. I'd basked in
notions not at all like that. In fact,
I've felt that happiness -
a fitting link to gold, and power -
is pleasure's caveat.

"Perhaps your thinking's
topsy-turvy", The sage quietly opined
"For when mammon grasps the heart,
and soul and mind,
it flatters you to thinking
that Money's all that matters; but
when the judgment comes...perhaps its
Hell you'll find.

"Bah! You who live in poverty
give poor counsel!" he retorted,
but, then...he now wears the devil's golden
chains, I've heard reported - ignoring
good advice; and with his life now done;
lo, he's lost what little happiness
he won in misdirected
blood and sweat and tears.

Confirming all my fears.

The answers that have come to you concerning these important questions -
and the feelings that the Spirit touched you with as you considered them - will
serve as a guide to you. Listen. And where necessary, change your life.

Remember, once more, Steven's testimony as he served in Japan:

"I knew, then, what life in this world is all about. I am the star in my own little play. I must make my own choice as to how I will play my part. Actually, I have two choices: I can choose to complete the important role that my Father in Heaven has given me to play; or I can allow myself to be lured away, instead, by the popularity, pride, lust and riches of the evil one. I must decide this for myself; and the decision I make will have eternal consequences for good or for evil."

I bear my witness that nothing is real except the spiritual verities that are a part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ever since hearing of Steven's experience, and feeling the Spirit's powerful testimony within me, I have been a different man. I have seen the world in an entirely different light. I have been more giving. Less acquisitive, more sensitive to the Spirit as the needs of others were revealed to me. That is, I discovered, the whole reason that we are here on earth. For it is through blessing others - as directed by the promptings of the Holy Spirit - that we play the role that God sent us here to play.

I pray for strength to do God's will. I pray for the ability to endure in faith - with Christ as my example—to the very end. I pray for the insight necessary to use the props for the purpose for which they were given; and to be a blessing - and not a hindrance - to all those who God has given me to love.

I will close my remarks as I began. A gentle reminder that:

"If you continue the way you're going, you'll get there."