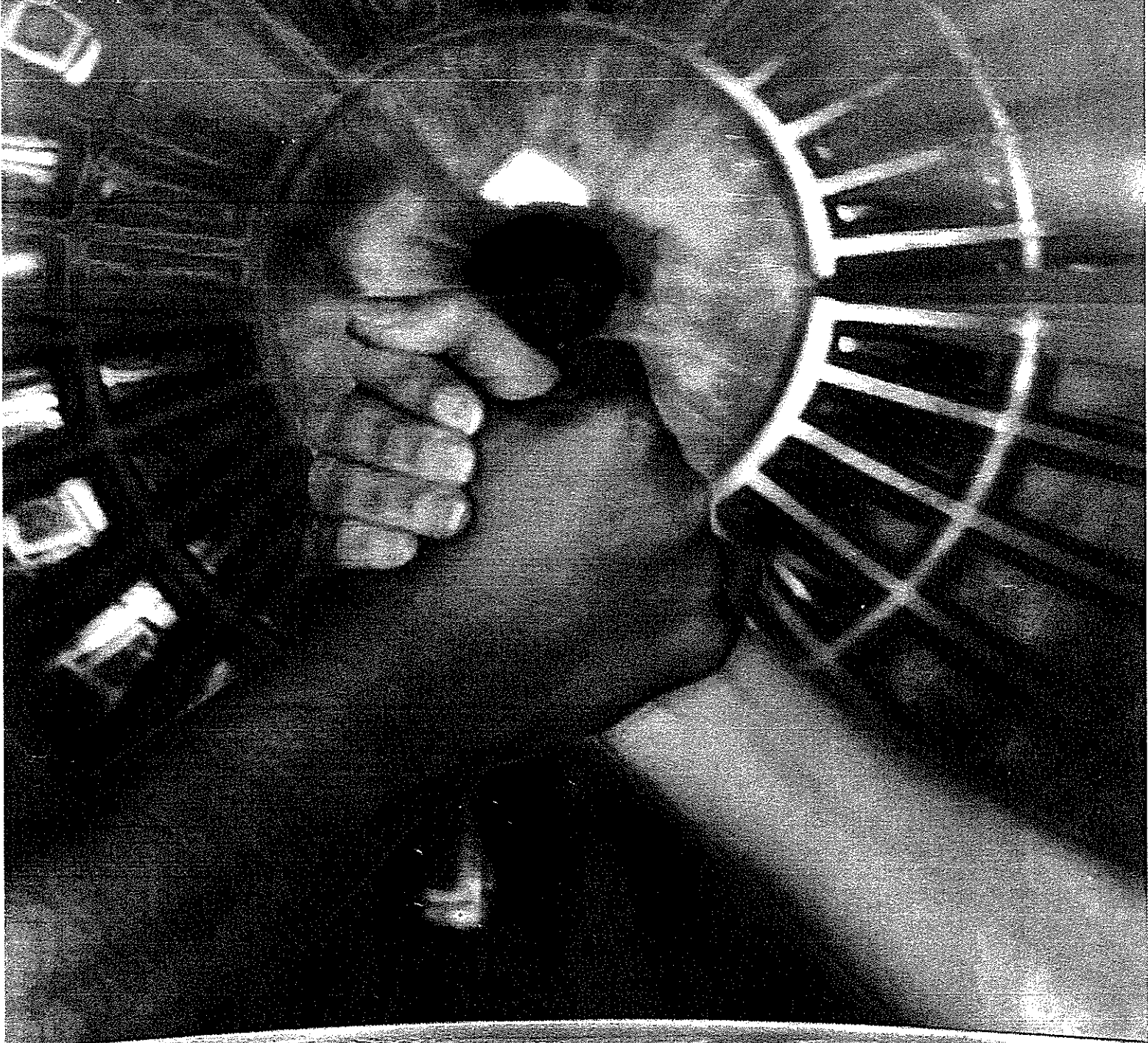


A CODE OF ETHICS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY

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a window on the world

Is biblical Mammon a source of evil?

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.
(Matthew 6:24)

When Christ enjoined his followers to choose between God and Mammon he was seeking a definitive decision which knows of no intermediate position. His statement is explicit. The basic drift of Christ's meaning is self-evident; however, a closer look at the word *Mammon* could help us gain a better insight into Christ's saying.

The Greek word *mammon* is used only in the New Testament texts and it is derived from the Aramaic *mamon/mamona* (the latter being the form of the word with the definitive article). It is found once in the Qumran documents and it was also used in the Jewish writings of our era. Its basic meaning is wealth, riches, money, profit and possessions (not necessarily money), and scholars think that there was also a West Semitic god of riches called *Mamon* - hence my rendering of *Mammon* with an uppercase M.

In view of the foregoing points, it becomes clear that Christ is asking us not to adore any possessions whatsoever, but instead to be wholly devoted to and lean solely upon the source of all possessions, namely the living and life-giving God.

This tenet of Christ's doctrine can be better appreciated in the literary context in which it is found, namely the Sermon on the Mount whose opening statement by Christ declares: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:3). Although the parallel text in Luke 6:30 speaks of the poor rather than the poor in spirit, it is important to note that there is no contradiction between these two texts:

Matthew 5:3 is in fact a paraphrase of Luke 6:30, for the poor in spirit are the poor, namely the lowly classes whose spirit is crushed by need (which could also be of an economic nature) and oppression.

When Christ said that the poor/poor in spirit were blessed for theirs was the kingdom of heaven, he was not saying that only the poor would enter the kingdom: he meant that **EVEN** the poor will enter the kingdom. He said this against the mentality of those (for example, the Pharisees) who still thought that poverty and its corollaries were a curse. Christ is saying that now the kingdom of heaven surpasses all wealth and that it is offered to everybody even to the poor and the oppressed.

The foregoing points show that we should link Christ's saying about *Mammon* with his stance on the poor/poor in spirit. Thus, one has to conclude that God Himself should be our treasure and that, unless we are careful, riches (of whatever nature) could impede us from entering His kingdom. In this sense, the meaning of detachment for 'poor in spirit' is an exact but a derived meaning. Christ praised the poor/poor in spirit not because of their poverty but because of their religious stance, since in general it is such people who rely solely on God - who is the source of all riches anyway.

The upshot is that money, riches, possessions, profit, and wealth could prove to be a source of evil if we focus unduly on them - and a look around the contemporary world seems to warrant this conclusion.

Prof. Anthony Frendo is a biblical scholar and archaeologist at the University of Malta.

