A young man once asked God how long a million years was to him. God replied, "A million years to me is just like a single second to you." The young man asked God what a million dollars was to him. God replied, "A million dollars to me is just like a single penny to you." Then the young man got his courage up and asked, "God, could I have one of your pennies?" God smiled and replied, "Sure, just a second." --Anonymous

Jesus says that we cannot serve both God and mammon at the same time. Jesus is asking us to make God the first priority in everything. Of course mammon is commonly misunderstood as referring to just money. The idea of mammon is a little more complex. Mammon is defined by Webster’s as “riches, greed, and worldly gain personified as a false god in the New Testament.” Mammon is defined as “riches considered as an evil influence of object or worship.” Instead of the question, what do I own, the question becomes, what owns me? That’s mammon.

You see, money in itself is a neutral thing, neither good nor evil. Money is a means to an end whereby we are able to get things necessary for our well being, and the well being of our family and community. Mammon, however, is the perversion whereby money or processions cease to be the means to an end and rather becomes the end unto itself, thereby manifesting itself as more important than God and the people around us as we see so clearly in the first reading from the Prophet Amos.

My friends, when money, riches or possessions become more important than our family members, for example, we know that money ceases to be neutral. Whenever we treat other human beings solely as a means to the end for obtaining money, for example, money ceases to be money and becomes mammon. We know that money or possessions ought to never be more important than other human beings. This is why I have no problem with that shiny new car some people can afford. Shiny new cars are a lot of fun when we can truly afford them. But if that shiny new car is somehow more important than the needs of the family, or the education or well being of our children, Houston we have a problem. It is a priority issue. Money has become mammon.

There are many of us here who are good stewards of their money. There are many of us here who are working on it. Good stewards don’t get caught by credit card debt. Stewards don’t buy things that they can’t afford. They have savings to draw from when unexpected things happen. Their family is their first priority and they give their first fruits to God, which is to say they plan their giving rather than giving what happens to be left over at the end of the week. There are many of us here today who are working on becoming better stewards of our time, talent and treasure. The point of the Gospel today is: Everything is a gift from God. Everything is a gift from God. We must always remember God does not owe us anything, and yet He gives nevertheless. The challenge is to not let any of God’s gifts to become mammon, treating His gifts as if they are more important than God, family or neighbor. A couple of illustrations…
Twelve years ago, I was at a stewardship convention in New Orleans. It was rudely interrupted by Hurricane Ivan. They thought that the Hurricane would hit New Orleans dead on. As we learned from Hurricane Katrina the following year, I and those with me could have been in a real mess. New Orleans is 10 feet below sea level. A good tidal surge, as we know, has the potential to put the entire city under 17 feet of water. Therefore, the mayor ordered the evacuation of the city. It was kind of like a dress rehearsal for Katrina the following year. They closed the airport before I could get a flight. I searched and searched for cars to rent and there were none available. Even if I could get a car, all the roads out of New Orleans were completely jammed. I was amazed that I couldn’t find a way to buy my way out of the city. Money became meaningless in New Orleans, a rather ironic statement. All that mattered to the people in that city at that moment were the safety of their families, the safety of their neighbors and a good and gracious God.

About seventeen years ago, I was on a plane that just took off from O’Hare that began to fill up with smoke in the main cabin. The captain’s voice over the intercom said, “Thank you for flying with us, as you may have noticed, there is some smoke gathering in the main cabin, now it probably isn’t serious, but just to be on the safe side, we are going to turn around and switch planes.” As we landed, we were greeted by a long caravan of fire trucks and ambulances. Money didn’t matter in that moment. Money was irrelevant. All that mattered was a competent pilot and a good and gracious God. The couple that was sitting next to me hadn’t spoken to me the entire time. After we landed, they turned to me and asked, “so what do you do for a living?” I said, I am catholic priest. A moment of stunned silence before they burst out laughing. They thought that was funny.

As a priest, I have the privilege of celebrating a lot of funerals. As I have said time and time again, you don’t see too many hearses going down the road with a u-haul trailer attached to the back. We know we can’t take it with us. Ultimately, everything in life is a gift from God. Every blessing we receive comes from God and will eventually go back to God. And what a wonderful gift, the gift of life! But that gift goes back to God too, my friends. Life is a gift from God that we have no entitlement to.

And so the million dollar question in the spirit life is how do we use this gift of life? Do I respect life as a gift or have the comforts in my life become an idol, more important than God, family and the human family? Am I using this gift of life for ego satisfaction or for love of God and neighbor? Is life a gift for me or have I transformed the very gift of life into mammon. That’s the question on God’s minds when we meet him at the end of time. I believe everything that happens in this life prepares us for everlasting life, our eternal vocation. We are challenged this weekend to not let anything get in the way of that vocation.
I would like to conclude with the wisdom of St. Robert Bellarmine whose feast day was last week. He writes, “If you are wise, know that you have been created for the glory of God and your own eternal salvation. This is your goal; this is the center of your life; this is the treasure of your heart. If you reach this goal, you will find happiness. If you fail to reach it, you will find misery. May you consider truly good whatever leads to your goal and truly evil whatever makes you fall away from it. Prosperity and adversity, wealth and poverty, health and sickness, honors and humiliations, life and death, in the mind of the wise man, are not to be sought for their own sake, nor avoided for their own sake. But if they contribute to the glory of God and your eternal happiness, then they are good and should be sought. If they detract from this, they are evil and to be avoided.”

We know that God wills everyone to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth. The only people in the universe, however, that can frustrate the divine will are you and me.