

GREAT IMPERATIVES OF THE BIBLE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 15, 1961 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

We might all agree that the heart and center of Christianity is expressed in its great nouns--God, Christ, the Church, Love, Service, Salvation, Righteousness--and many others. But I would also like to suggest that very near the heart and center of Christianity are its verbs. Verbs are words that imply action, that contain within themselves the idea of doing, or being, or seeing, or saying, something. When you look at it from the standpoint of man's responsibility the center of our religion is in the verbs.

I would like to suggest therefore, some great imperatives of the gospel. By the word imperative I mean something that implies a command or an exhortation. An imperative is something not to be avoided or evaded. An imperative is obligatory; it is binding; it is compulsory. In thinking of man's duties to God we find these great verbs of Christianity which are distinct, clear imperatives.

Come

A logical place to begin might well be with the verb "come," so we turn to Matthew 11:28-30 where Jesus said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." The great imperative "come" applies to all men that live this side of the cross. Unless we are willing to come to Christ there is no hope for eternal salvation. Only in Christ is there forgiveness of sins, so it devolves upon man that he must come.

In that same great passage there was the word "yoke." Sometimes when we speak of Christianity as a yoke someone says, "Well, I do not like the idea of Christianity as a burden." Let me explain the word yoke. I would begin the explanation by asking you to visualize an ox pulling a load, for that is the illustration the Lord is using. No ox can pull a load without a yoke about its neck. There is no other way to harness an ox to a load or for an ox to do a worthwhile work than to put a yoke about him.

By comparison I would say there is no way for man to do what God created him to do without putting the blessed yoke of Christianity about his neck. You may also notice in this passage that Jesus said, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." The yoke fits the nature of man. I might even make the comparison that man, in order to earn a living, puts a yoke about himself. There is not one of us who does not welcome the opportunity of working. Even if you could give us the alternative of sitting idly by through the years and not working there is not one of us who would take that alternative. I like to work, because it means that my life means something; it counts for something. There is not a person in this audience that would give up his responsibilities of work. None of us would choose a life of laziness and idleness. There is a deep satisfaction in putting the yoke of responsibility around oneself and doing things that matter. And that is what Christianity is. It is a voluntary yoke. No man has to wear the yoke of Christianity, but if he wants his life to count for something, if he wants it to mean something, in the sense of doing good, then he gladly chooses to wear this yoke that is easy, this burden that is light. So, the whole responsibility of man begins, the imperatives of the gospel begin, with the invitation to "come." How we long for every person we know to come quickly and to come with eagerness to accept the responsibilities of being a Christian.

Believe

In this beginning area of coming to Christ there are some other imperatives. "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house." (Acts 16:31). "Believe" is an imperative and it is absolutely essential if we would be saved. No man who does not believe in God and in Christ can expect to receive God's blessings of heaven.

Then beyond that, in Philippians 2, there is the 11th verse which closes a paragraph, from which I choose just the closing clause, "Confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the father," a part of Paul's great, magnificent prayer that ends with "that every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." What a thrill it is to stand up and confess Christ before men. That is an imperative.

In Acts 2:38, there is the imperative, "Repent ye," which is followed immediately by "and be baptized" another imperative, "everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins." All these are imperatives. In still another passage, Acts 22:16, Ananias, the preacher, has come into the presence of Saul, the great persecutor of Christians, who now because of his experience on the road to Damascus has come to believe in Christ. He has spent three days penitently praying and fasting. Then, this man delivers to him the imperative "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins," All of these are imperatives. This is God's way to become a Christian and there is no other. God's way is the only way into God's church.

Love

When one has become a Christian do the imperatives cease? The answer, of course, is that they have only begun. I think the greatest single commandment in all the Bible is the one recorded in Mark 12, beginning in verse 28 and continuing through verse 30. You immediately recognize this as the scene in which the scribe came and said to Jesus, "What commandment is the first of all?" Christ's answer was, "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt..." and then comes the imperative, "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." Then in the next verse he goes on to name a second commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." As we think about coming from the water of baptism and beginning the Christian life, surely it begins with "love God and love your fellowman." These are imperatives to Christians. As long as we live this will be necessary.

What does it mean to love God? I think of the passage in Matthew 6:33, where another imperative says, "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness." That is what it means to love God. It means to put him first, above anything and everything else on earth. "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness." I love my wife and I seek and want and need her, but I want her to love God more than she loves me. I love my children and want their love, but I want them to love God more than they love me, more than they will love anyone else in life. In Matthew 10, beginning with verse 37, there is this paragraph, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that doth not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." Those are simply spelling out that Old Testament commandment, one of the ten, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Ex. 20:2). God must be first.

In the same sermon on the mount from which we quoted just a moment ago there is another imperative that suggests what it means to love God, "Let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:16).

The other of those two great commandments was "Love your neighbor as yourself." What does that mean? Over in I Peter 1:22 it says, "Love one another from the heart, fervently." That is what it means to love your fellowman, "from the heart, fervently." Just a chapter later in chapter 2, verse 17, Peter admonishes "Love the brotherhood." In Gal. 6:10, Paul adds, "... work that which is good toward all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith." Our love of the brotherhood means doing good. It means being considerate of the other person's need and sharing that need wherever we can be of help.

Be

In that same connection we think of another imperative in James, where he said, "Be ye doers of the word." There is no word that is more significant in Christianity than that word do. We are to be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding ourselves. With this same general emphasis on doing for others, how could we overlook Matt. 7:12, the sentence where Jesus says, "All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them." Christianity is not complete even at that point of loving God and loving our fellowmen. In order to be Christians we must recognize the imperative of keeping ourselves from the sins of the world. It is in Paul's first letter to Timothy, chapter 5, verse 22, that he says to this fine young gospel preacher, "Keep thyself pure." The word "keep" is the imperative. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4, verse 8, there is another indication of what it means to keep oneself pure. He says, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." There is the imperative. We are to think on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely and of good report.

Go

Beyond this, as we think of our lives, there comes the greatest imperative of all for Christians, the imperative to carry the gospel of Christ that can save the souls of men to the millions who have not heard it. The last recorded words that Jesus spoke to man are those on the mount of Olives, just before he ascended. They begin with the words, "Go ye ..." There is the greatest imperative of all for Christians. "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

Can you for a moment visualize a great mass of humanity crowded together in a great square somewhere in some great rally? Can you see hut after hut stretched across the continent of Asia? Can you see the millions of people across the continent of Africa, black of skin, primitive in living habits? Can you see them in South America, with their various levels of civilization? Can you see them across Europe? Can you see them across our own land? "Go ye," he is talking to us, "... therefore and make disciples of all the nations." The book of Matthew is almost complete. This is the last sentence. In view of all that has been said before--the story of God's love in sending Christ, the story of Christ's life, his death on the cross--"Go ye therefore and make disciples ... baptize ... teach ..."

In the last letter that Paul wrote to Timothy, chapter 4, verse 2, he said, "Preach the word; be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching." He is talking to preachers, but it applies to all other Christians as well, for all of us in one way or another can play a part in preaching God's gospel. There is a passage in the book of Titus which says "Speak thou the

things which befit the sound doctrine.” (Titus 2:1). Man’s tongue as well as man’s head and heart are involved. In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 5, along about verse 21, we find, “Prove all things: hold fast to that which is good.” These are a part of this great emphasis on preaching God’s gospel. Prove everything, hold fast only to the true, and then speak it to the lost.

Conclusion

I have thought that we could well spend this time in looking into the gospel and that perhaps we needed to be stirred up to do more of what God wants Christians to do. It all begins with the great nouns of Christianity--God, Christ, the Church, Salvation, Love, Service, Righteousness, and many others. But after a while when you trace it down to man it turns into verbs every time. It is not enough to know. We could know everything God taught and be lost. It is only enough when we do what God says. That doing begins, as we said a few moments ago, with the word come, so I leave the lesson with you, leave it with God’s continuing invitation. Come to him, penitently ask for the forgiveness of sins, be buried with him in baptism, then go forth to live with him. If you are not a Christian this very moment affords such an opportunity. You must not turn it down. If you are a Christian and need to come back to rededicate your life, do it now. Everything is in readiness. There is no reason to wait. The Lord is listening; the congregation is praying. Come to Christ now!