

WITHOUT AND WITHIN

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 7, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Albert Schweitzer was born into an ideal home. The necessities of life were abundant as were also many of the extras of life. By the extras of life I do not necessarily mean the luxuries of life, but rather such things as a warm and happy atmosphere. There were many visitors, providing interesting conversations to which young Schweitzer could listen. There were fine music and other cultural advantages. Not until he was old enough to go to school was he conscious that there was evil in the world. The realization came one day when he saw a little boy who had no lunch. This disturbed him greatly and made a lasting impression upon him. The presence of evil in the world became a formative influence upon his life, for he has spent most of his ninety years trying to overcome evil and to alleviate suffering. The unusual talents of this noted man have been challenged by the evils which plague mankind.

The fact is that we live in an evil world. The apostle Peter warned, "Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." (I Peter 5:8). When our Lord lived upon the earth, he spoke of Satan as the "Prince of this world." (John 12:31;16:11). As we observe affairs about us, we do not find it hard to believe that Satan is the prince of this world.

Our world is plagued by many wrongs, evil attitudes. Recently I examined the basic commandments of both Old and New Testaments to discover the evil attitudes which they were designed to correct. My list is not complete, but it includes hate, envy, jealousy, pride, selfishness, covetousness, greed, lust, sensualism, materialism, and godlessness. These evil attitudes of heart result in evil actions, such as murder, adultery, stealing, lying, drunkenness, and many others. The apostle Paul gave one of the most comprehensive lists of evils, as he wrote to the Galatian Christians, "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, visions, parties, envyings, drunkenness, revellings, and such like; of which I forewarn you, even as I did forewarn you, that they who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." (Gal. 5:19-21).

From the scriptures and from our own observation we readily realize that we live in an evil world. Avoiding the evil that would overcome us is certainly one of our major concerns in life. By what method, or methods, can we best escape the destructive influences about us? It is to the answering of this question that we direct our efforts in this study.

Approach No. I--External

Our first approach might be called an effort to control the environment about us. It might well be called an external approach. The idea is a very simple one: eliminate the evil in the world about us. There is value in considering disease, on the one hand, as parallel to sin and temptation, on the other. As disease seeks the destruction of our bodies, sin seeks the destruction of our souls. By what methods, then, do we seek to prevent our bodies from becoming diseased?

First of all, we seek to keep our homes and our belongings clean. We spend much energy in the washing of clothes and the regular renovation of our belongings. We insist that our children wash their hands before they handle food which will go into their mouths. Our legislatures have passed pure food laws, by which we seek to guarantee that the foods that come to our tables will not be contaminated. Every town and city across the nation has gone to both trouble and expense to insure a pure water supply, and then announces this purity with a sign at the edge of the city limits, "Public water supply approved." Our restaurants are regularly inspected and graded according to their cleanliness. Inspectors carefully make a bacteria count of the dishes and glasses that are to be used. We go to great expense and trouble to provide sanitary disposal for all refuse. We have developed many different kinds of disinfectants. All of this is designed to remove disease germs from our surroundings and to prevent them from making contact with our bodies.

Eliminate Moral Evils

The same method has its applications to the evils of which we have been speaking. Salacious and pornographic literature needs to be boldly removed from the newsstands and destroyed. It is more damaging to the mind, especially the mind of our young people, than are the germs which we are so concerned to eliminate from our surroundings. In the same manner we are concerned over indecent movies. We must insist upon real, meaningful censorship at the source. While American movies are a little better than those made in France, Italy, and certain other foreign nations, the moral and ethical standards of the movies produced by Hollywood have definitely declined in the past two decades. Never high, they have fallen noticeably.

Profanity and impure speech, likewise, should be outlawed. We are impressed with the fact that the Federal Communication Commission had been able to eliminate profanity from thousands of radio and television stations with a high degree of success. We also note that there are many impure or suggestive words that are not permitted on the air. The same efforts toward raising the standard of speech should be carried on in other areas. Whatever influences we can exert in the making of immodest, modern dress

more Christian should be exercised. Indecent, suggestive attire has become so common that it is indeed difficult even for Christian to dress properly. Again, whatever influence we can have toward raising the behavior standards should be exerted with forthrightness.

Eliminate Liquor

Our principle also applies to the drinking of intoxicants. Whatever we Christians can do to reduce the amount of liquor used, we should do without delay. If it were possible we should hope to stop the production of every kind of intoxicant, though this seems a bit unrealistic to hope for in our modern world. Perhaps it is more realistic to speak against the advertising of liquor. Surely a product which causes violent death on the highways, wrecks homes, destroys lives, and leads toward the damnation of souls, ought not to be advertised in neon lights and with four-color ads in the magazines. We ought also to exercise whatever influence we have toward reducing the ease with which liquor can be purchased, rather than making its purchase more convenient. The fewer liquor outlets there are, the less liquor will be sold. The more difficult it is to buy, the fewer there will be who buy it.

Just at this time, as is true every two years, our State of Tennessee Legislature considers the perennial question of whether to authorize local option elections to legalize the sale of liquor-by-the-drink. This is a step in the wrong direction and should be opposed by Christians. Statistics indicate that where liquor is made more accessible through the sale by-the-drink in restaurants and hotels, more liquor is consumed than where it is sold only in package stores. It is indeed impressive to note that the per capita liquor consumption of the worst eight states of our union averaged something like two gallons per person in 1963 and one state even had a four gallon per person record. Each of these states was a state in which it is legal to buy liquor both in packages and by-the-drink. Conversely, at the bottom of the list of states, with less than one gallon per capita consumption of liquor on the average, were eight states where package sale is permissible, but where it is not permissible to buy liquor by-the-drink in restaurants.

Similarly, it is interesting to note that the alcoholism rate in states at the top of the list was as high as 8900 per 100,000 population, though the average was approximately 5,000 alcoholics per 100,000. Each of the leading ten states was a package and liquor-by-the-drink state. Conversely, the lowest state in this same study had an alcoholism rate that reached only 1,008 per 100,000, and among the lowest nine states no state had more than 2316 per 100,000 citizens. These were states in which liquor-by-the-drink was not permissible.

Still further, statistics indicate that those states which have the highest death-rate on the highway because of drunken driving are those states that sell liquor-by-the-drink, whereas those states that do not sell liquor-by-the-drink have a lower death-by-drunken-driving rate. These statistics were prepared and distributed by the United Tennessee League, 150 4th Avenue, North, Nashville, Tenn. They were gathered from the "Distilled Spirits Industry, Annual Statistical Review," 1963; Reports from the American Business Men's Research Foundation; and Accident Facts, 1959-1964 Editions, National Safety Council.

A Wrong Approach

As we speak of eliminating evil from our world there are those who suggest the hopelessness of this enterprise and suggest in its place that we simply withdraw from the evil world. This is the approach of monasticism and of the utopian communities that have been established from time to time both in Europe and in America. This is the wrong approach, however, because it does not work. Sin is not something that can be fenced out by withdrawing geographically from the cities to some quiet secluded spot. Sin does not work that way. It is wrong, however, even more especially, because it is not God's will for his children to withdraw from the world. Christ prayed, "I pray not that thou shouldst take them from the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one." (John 17:15).

It is impossible to build a wall so high or so wide that it will keep all sin and all temptation away. Man cannot escape temptation. We ought to do all that we can to improve the environment in which we live, but it is not possible for us to so regulate our environment that there will be no temptation to sin. We parents have a special obligation to do all that we can to control the influences that will come into the lives of our children, for in their early years they do not have the ability or the maturity to make their own choices. Just as we are careful about the food that we feed them, we must also be careful about the ideas and influences that we allow to come into their minds. This is a frighteningly heavy responsibility, when we live in a world where communication of all kinds of ideas is as easy and as common as in our world.

Approach No. II--Internal

After we have done all that we can do to influence our environment for good, we still have a great battle before us. This approach is suggested by Rom. 12:21, where the apostle Paul said, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." Our second approach is to so strengthen our own spiritual selves that we will have a resistance to evil that will make it impossible for evil to take hold of our lives.

A strong, healthy body is the best defense against disease. For this reason we provide wholesome food for our children, and then insist upon proper rest and exercise. As we develop radiant health within these young bodies, they have a resistance to disease that protects them. In addition, we inoculate, vaccinate, and otherwise supplement the body's defensive powers. In so doing we build up a body resistance against disease.

Similarly, a strong, healthy soul is the best defense against sin. This means that we need to feed on the best of spiritual food until we are spiritually strong. Bible reading, prayer, and meditation in the home are suggested. Attendance at Bible classes and worship regularly are also vitally important. Association with other Christians of high ideals is also extremely valuable. As we develop our inner spiritual selves we build a resistance against the sins and temptations about us.

In this same manner, we build our houses. We cannot prevent the coming of the wind and the rain, but we can erect houses that are designed to withstand the storms. We insulate against the weather. Similarly, we impregnate cloth with chemicals in order to make it resistant to water, and thereby provide rain-clothing for ourselves. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul said, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it." (I Cor. 10:13). God has promised to provide a way of escape in every difficult situation, if we will only do our best to escape. No temptation has taken us but such as man can bear. If we build up our inner strength, we can withstand whatever the world about us may bring.

Ultimately, God wants each one of us to be able to face all kinds of temptations, without faltering. In the long ago, Joseph in Egypt was not able to control his environment, but he was able to be strong enough to withstand the temptations that came. Similarly, the apostle Paul had no means of immediately changing the pagan, sensual, materialistic condition of the Roman Empire, but he could stand like a rock against its pressures. While we Christians ought to do all that we can to improve the environment in which we live, our best line of defense lies within our own spiritual development. As devout Christians we ultimately stand like a giant oak tree in a storm. We feel the wind, the influence of the storm, but when the wind and the rain have passed we find ourselves still anchored firmly where we were before the storm came.

Conclusion

There is great wisdom in becoming a Christian early in life. This is an insulation against many temptations which will come later on. Having dedicated one's heart to Christ and having committed one's self to Christ's way of life we find that it is much easier to make the difficult decisions of the teen years and the later years. One great decision--that of becoming a Christian--makes all other decisions easier. As we endeavor to battle against the evils of the world about us, the wisest step that we can take is to enroll in the army of the Lord, and then under his direction and by his power stand firmly against the evils which surround us.