

CHRISTIANITY -- A BURDEN AND A SACRIFICE?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 11, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

There are those who consider Christianity a burden. They think of the Christian life as a series of rather unpleasant sacrifices. A continual going to worship and the need to give of one's financial means regularly are unpleasant necessities, attached to the membership in the church. The responsibilities of visiting the sick, caring for others who are in need, and helping in every good work are also burdensome. Even the individual duties of reading the Bible and praying to God are a weight to be borne patiently. But most of all, the obligation to give up many of the so-called pleasures of the world, such as drinking, gambling, dancing, and sensual living of all kinds, is a heavy sacrifice and burden. All of these keep Christianity from being a joy.

Christians who have these feelings are prone to do just as little as is absolutely necessary. They attend worship only on Sunday morning; they give only a minimum of their means; and they do only a little of the studying and praying and working that they ought to do. They do not want to miss Heaven, so they are committed to meet the minimum requirements, but beyond that they do not wish to go.

This reminds us of a story concerning Andrew Jackson. More than a century ago, when he made his decision that he ought to be a church member, he approached the minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Nashville and made known his desire. In the ensuing conversation the preacher asked Mr. Jackson a number of questions, among which was, "Do you forgive your enemies?" Mr. Jackson, being a rather spectacular military man as well as a political leader had enemies against whom he had decided feelings. He asked, "Is that absolutely necessary?" The answer, of course, was, "Yes." After a pause, Mr. Jackson replied, "Then, I forgive them." The implication is rather strong that it was not his wish to forgive his enemies but if that was absolutely necessary, then he would forgive them. It is this feeling among some Christians today--that they will do what is absolutely necessary--that leads us to speak on this theme.

There are a great many other people who do not become Christians at all because they consider Christianity a burden. Its sacrifices are too heavy. It takes too much time and too much money. It interrupts normal living. It would destroy their liberty and impinge upon their freedom, so they pass Christianity by.

We Were Lost--We Were Redeemed

In view of the above ideas, it is heartening to remember that the early Christians did not share this feeling that Christianity is a sacrifice and a burden. Be it also remembered that the early Christians gave up very much more than we modern Christians give up in order to wear the name of Christ, yet, even so, they did not find Christianity a burden. Let us go back and read some of the passages of the New Testament in order that we may feel as they felt and see Christianity in its true perspective.

Our beginning point is found in Romans 3:10, 23, "There is none righteous, no, not one ... All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." A similar scripture is found in I John 1:8, 10, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us ... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." In order that we may properly orient ourselves, we need to remember the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden. Since that first pair rebelled against God and opened the flood-gates to sin, our world has been engulfed, and all men (with the exception of Christ) have been sinners. Our thinking needs to begin with the fact that we were lost and in need of redemption.

The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 2:12-13, brings this lost condition to greater reality for those of us who are Gentiles, "Ye were at that time separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus ye that once were afar off are made nigh in the blood of Christ." We would underscore the phrase "having no hope and without God in the world." That was our condition before Christ came and gave us the way of escape so that we might be saved.

In Romans 5:5, 9, 11, Paul wrote, "God commendeth his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, shall we be saved from the wrath of God through him ... We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." It is here that the word reconciliation comes into our consciousness. We were estranged from God, lost and without hope, and then Christ came and reconciled us to the Father.

In I Peter 1:18-23, the apostle Peter adds to our understanding in these words, "Ye were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver and gold, from your vain manner of life handed down from your fathers; but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ: who was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world, but was manifested at the end of the times for your sake, who through him are believers in God, that raised him from the dead, and gave him glory; so that your faith and hope might be in God. Seeing ye have purified your souls in your obedience to the truth unto unfeigned love of the brethren,

love one another from the heart fervently: having been begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, through the word of God, which liveth and abideth." The key word here is the word redemption. Christ paid our penalty and brought us back from the bondage of sin. Until he paid the price to free our souls from death, we were without hope and were destined to spend eternity in hell.

In speaking of God, Paul says, "Who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:13-14). We were in darkness, but then God transported us into the kingdom of light. The apostle Paul in speaking to the elders at Ephesus, as recorded in Acts 20:28, used the expression, "the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood."

Finally, in I Cor. 6:19-20, and 7:23, we read, "Ye are not your own; for ye were bought with a price: glorify God therefore in your body ... Ye were bought with a price: become not bondservants of men." Since we have been purchased by the blood of Christ, we belong not to ourselves to do as we wish, but we belong to the Lord to do as he wishes. This is not burdensome, since he has sacrificed so much for us. It is only right and proper. Just as a man who has been saved from drowning feels a life-long gratitude to the one who saved him, so we have feelings of gratitude to our Lord who saved us for eternity.

We Are New Creatures

A second major consideration is presented by the apostle Paul in II Cor. 5:17-19, "Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new. But all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ; and gave unto us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself," In realizing that Christianity is not a burden or a sacrifice, the second meaningful concept is the idea that Christians are new creatures. Christians have a new eternal destiny, a new set of goals, a new system of values, and a new view of life in general. Things that once would have been a burden, no longer are burdens because Christians are new creatures.

In recent months one of the major automobile makers introduced its new models with the slogan, "An old name has a new car." Rather clever advertising. An old and honored name now has a new and much improved car. This is exactly what happens when one becomes a Christian. A friend still introduces him by his old name; a picture will reveal the same profile and general appearance as before. However, inside, he is a new creature. As the apostle Paul put it in Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

One of our clearest examples of what it means to be completely made over by becoming a Christian is found in the apostle Paul. Hear him say, as in Gal. 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ: and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me." Listen again as he says, "Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ." (Phil. 3:7).

Let Us Live For Christ

In view of the fact that we are new creatures, with a new view of the world and everything in it, it is logical to think that we would live a higher type of life. The apostle Paul says as much in Colossians 3:1-3, "If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. For ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." A similar passage is Romans 6:16-18, "Know ye not, that to whom ye present yourselves as servants unto obedience, his servants ye are whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered; and being made free from sin, ye became servants of righteousness."

In Romans 6:2, the apostle Paul uses the expression, "We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein?" In Romans 8:9, 14 he further points out our obligation to live spiritual lives in these words, "Ye are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you. But if any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his ... For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God."

Nowhere is the obligation to live pure, clean, righteous lives more sharply presented than by the apostle John in I John 1:6-7, "If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin." Christians are a different kind of people, living on a higher level, because they are bought with the blood of Christ and because they have a new outlook on life.

Self Denial

While Jesus was on the earth, he told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lost his life for my sake shall find it." (Matt. 16:24-25).

Is this self-denial? Imagine for a moment a young man who spends several thousand hours through his youth and early manhood in training to be a champion athlete. See him later on, at the very top of his sport, he wears the Olympic coat with the insignia showing

that he is to represent the United States of America at the Olympic games. Watch him as he goes to Rome, or Melbourne, or some other world capital. See him as he performs flawlessly in the running of his race and finally watch him as he stands on the top step of the podium and receives the gold medal, signifying that he is the world's champion in his field. Then ask him, "Didn't you have to sacrifice a great deal in order to get here?" His answer, "In a sense, I guess I did make some sacrifice. I worked long hours in training. I passed by a lot of soft and rich food that the other boys ate. I limited myself in a good many ways in order to be in training, but none of these are real sacrifices. This program of training has been a great blessing, for it has enabled me to achieve something of real importance. As I look back, my training program was no sacrifice but a great blessing." Similarly, we Christians, who are running in a far greater Olympics, look back to see that we have really given up nothing of importance. Christianity is pure blessing.

Conclusion

When we realize the whole situation--our sin, our redemption, and our newness of life--Christianity is not a burden or a sacrifice. It is a joy and a challenge and no one of us would go back to the world's ways of self-indulgence and weakness. Self-control, high purpose, and strength bring infinitely more satisfaction and happiness than the way of the world.

Isn't it fitting to close this lesson with those sentences from the apostle Paul found in Romans 6:3-5, where he says, "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall he also in the likeness of his resurrection." Yes, even in becoming Christians, we symbolically are buried, showing that the old sinful man is dead, and then a moment later are raised from the grave of water to walk in a new kind of life.