

WORKERS TOGETHER WITH GOD

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 8, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Over a span of slightly more than thirty years I have been preaching the gospel of Christ. Several thousand times it has been my privilege to extend the Lord's invitation to those who are not yet Christians. Many have come to Christ, but many others have not come. I have often wondered why. While it is obviously not possible for me to comprehend all of the factors that are involved, I believe that I do know at least some of the reasons why men do not respond to Christ's call.

First of all, the Lord's invitation is not very meaningful to many because they do not feel lost. They are able to carry on the various activities of their lives unimpaired. There is no obvious, outward evidence that they are in positions of danger. A false sense of well-being has crowded out any anxiety that might have come from feelings of being lost.

A second reason why men do not respond to Christ's appeal is found in the fact that they do not realize the great blessings and joys that are to be found in Christ. Not until one has been a Christian for many years, and not even fully then, does one realize how much Christianity means in his life. Before one becomes a Christian it is utterly impossible to comprehend the blessings that Christianity brings.

In the third place, men do not respond to Christ because they do not visualize the joys of heaven, or the tragedy of hell. These are words in their vocabularies, but they are so remote as to be unreal so far as any practical influence in their lives is concerned.

In addition to these reasons, I think that sometimes the invitation, "Come to Christ and be saved," even sounds a bit selfish and weak to those who hear it. The idea of coming into the church in order to avoid suffering eternal punishment does not appeal to some, either because they do not wish to feel themselves obligated to others for such blessing or on the other hand they do not feel it quite right to get so much for so little. Whatever the reasons, there are many upon whose ears the invitation of Christ falls without effect.

There is another appeal which I wish I had made more real in my preaching through the years. Stated simply, it is "Come to Christ and yield your life to him, for he needs you to help in his work." From my own observation and from conversations with others, I have known of cases in which a person who was uninterested in the church became interested through being asked to help in some way. In one instance, a man who had shown no interest in the church became actively interested when a new congregation launched a building program. Having attended services occasionally with his wife, he learned of the needs and offered to give a piece of property as the site of the new building. Having done this, his interest in the church increased until after a time he became a member. In other situations I have noticed that when one has been asked to render a service to the Lord he finds himself much more disposed to accept the Lord.

Incidentally, this same principle operates after one has become a Christian. When a Christian becomes involved in the Lord's work, it draws him closer to the Lord. Those upon whom responsibilities rest, those who have certain specified duties to perform, those whose talents are challenged, find themselves becoming more and more deeply concerned with the Lord's cause. On the other hand, those who simply attend the services, but have no further connection with the Lord's work are likely to grow lukewarm and even to drop away entirely.

A Working Religion

In recent weeks I have read from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians a significant passage concerning salvation by grace. I should like to read it again and continue through the following verse. "For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2:8-10). Notice especially in this passage that we are saved in order that we might do good works. Titus 3:1 presents the same emphasis as it uses the phrase, "be ready unto every good work." Many other passages present this same emphasis, For example, Matthew 7:21, a part of the Lord's Sermon on the Mount, says, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Yet another New Testament passage emphasizing the importance of our convictions being undergirded by works and service is found in James 2:14-17, which reads as follows, "What doth it profit, my brethren, if a man say he hath faith, but hath not works? can that faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked and in lack of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; and yet ye give them not the things needful for the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead in itself." Christianity is a working religion. No one who wears the name of Christ can afford to be inactive in the Lord's work.

Christianity places great emphasis upon verbs. This is not to say that nouns are unimportant in the Christian religion, for such nouns as God, Christ, love, grace, commandments, and many others are vitally important. However, there is also a very strong emphasis in the scriptures on verbs, which are doing words. For example, in the Christian religion we find strong emphasis upon such words as these: believe, obey, go, be, do, work, speak, love, and many others. An interesting illustration of this point is found in the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus to ask, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" Jesus responded, "If thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments." The young man indicated that he had already been keeping the commandments and then asked, "What lack I yet?" At which point Jesus responded, "If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me." (Matt. 19:16-21). In this teaching of the Lord notice the emphasis upon five simple verbs: go, sell, give, have and come. Christianity is a working, doing religion.

What Is the Lord's Work?

The Lord's work is vast indeed, but it can be stated in simple terms and even briefly. There are three major areas in which God wishes his children to work: evangelism, which means the carrying of the gospel to lost mankind; edification, which means teaching and nourishing young Christians until they become full grown men and women in Christ; and benevolence, which means caring for those who are in need. In this connection it is interesting to notice that Jesus did all three of these things as suggested in Matthew 9:35, "And Jesus went about all the cities and the villages, teaching (edification) in their synagogues, and preaching (evangelism) the gospel of the kingdom, and healing (benevolence) all manner of disease and all manner of sickness." This important paragraph closes with the words, "The harvest indeed is plenteous, but the laborers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he send forth laborers into his harvest." (Matt. 9:37-38).

There are millions of people in the world today whose lives are tangled and ineffective. These people are frustrated and disturbed, because they are not living life according to God's rules. It is my conviction that most of the troubles that men face are a result of failing to live life according to the God-given directions which one finds in the inspired Bible. Not only for their ultimate salvation in eternity, but also because their lives now need the gospel to smooth out the problems and to untangle the knots, we must carry the gospel to those who do not yet recognize the Lord as Savior and follow his directions about how to live. Is this not a vital work that ought to challenge every good man on earth?

There are also many Christians who need to learn the Lord's way more fully. The teaching of the young and the guiding of those who are older into a fuller understanding of God's will is truly an important work that ought to challenge any good man. Then, there is the vast field of benevolence. Think of the limitless poor, the maimed, the halt, the sick, the hungry, the old, the orphaned, and many others who are in need. These people need kind, sympathetic care and this is a work that should be done in Christ's name. Does this not challenge a man who feels a love and concern for his fellowman and does it not constitute a work that one can yield his life to fulfilling?

One of the greatest blessings there is in life is to face a challenging work. There is nothing quite like the stimulus that comes from being needed in some important undertaking. To be called upon to help do something that needs to be done gives one's life meaning and significance. Pity the man who is not needed in carrying out the important tasks of the earth. Consider the man who has work to do, as a man that is blessed indeed. Christ provides the work that needs to be done, guidance about how it should be done, and the motivation for doing it. In Christ we find our lives filled with the greatest challenge there is on earth,

Not Passive

Many people think of the church as a place where you can go, sit passively for a little while, and then go back into life. This conception is disturbingly wrong. The Lord's church is a group of people who have accepted a new way of life which is certainly not passive. I think the church might be compared to a factory, which is designed to produce a product. It might be compared to a hospital, which is designed to get people well. It might be compared to a school, whose purpose is to train young people and to send them out into life ready for the situations which they shall meet. It might be compared to a library, whose purpose is to provide reading for all who come. A factory is no good if it does not produce a product that is worthwhile. A hospital is no good if it does not help people to get well. A school is no good if it does not send the students on to meet the demands of life adequately. A library is no good unless its books are in circulation. Christianity is no good unless it is doing the work which the Lord wants done.

In keeping with this theme are the words which our Lord spoke in the long ago, near the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, "Even so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 5:16). I have also been deeply impressed by a statement of our Lord, as recorded in John 5:12, as follows, "My Father worketh even until now, and I work." Notice that this indicates that God did not cease his working when he had completed the creation at the beginning of time. According to the Lord, God continues to work, and he also works. In this connection I would read also John 9:4 which says, "We must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." Life is so very brief for all of us. We have so few days, weeks, months and years. We dare not waste any of them. From the earliest time that we are capable of doing so, we need to be active in the Lord's work.

In connection with this realization of the brevity of life and the urgency of working while it is day, we recall the words of Thomas Carlyle, "The only happiness that a brave man ever troubles himself much about is happiness enough to get his work done. Not 'I can't eat!', but, 'I can't work!' that is the burden of all wise complaining men. It is, after all, the one unhappiness of a man that he cannot work; that he cannot get his destiny as a man fulfilled. Behold, the day passing swiftly away, our life is passing over; and the night cometh wherein no man can work!" At another time he added, "I say now to myself, Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifulest infinitesimal fraction of a product, produce it in God's name!" 'Tis the utmost thou hast in thee; out with it! Up; Up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might! Work while it is called day; the night cometh, wherein no man can work!

Finally, we would urge everyone who is not now enlisted in the army of the Lord to enlist immediately and to help fight the battle that needs to be fought for the Cause of Christ. The Lord needs you to help accomplish the work which needs to be done. To change the figure, do not sit on the sidelines and let others play the game. Your efforts are needed in order that the game of life may be won. The Lord's work is the most important work in the world and he needs everyone of us to help do it. Delay no longer, come and bless your life by becoming involved in the greatest work in the world. Then, as a kind of unsought by-product you will receive forgiveness of sins and will have the hope of eternal salvation in heaven. As an unsought by-product your life will have the peace of mind, the challenge, and the motivation that makes for genuine happiness. The Lord needs you and he needs you now.