

BEAUTY, TRUTH AND GOODNESS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 20, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The Bible often speaks in triads. For example, Paul closed his great thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians with the words, "Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (I Cor. 13:13). Toward the end of Christ's ministry he said of himself, "I am the way, the truth and the life." (John 14:6). Later the writer of the Hebrew letter spoke of, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, yea and forever." (Heb. 13:8). A slightly different kind of triad is found in Matt. 17:1 when the writer says of Jesus that he "taketh with him Peter, James and John," The use of threes in this manner is abundant throughout the scriptures.

I have mentioned these triads in order to suggest one of my own. The theme of this message centers upon three words: Beauty, Truth and Goodness. At first glance these three words seem to have little in common. However, a more careful look reveals that they have one central idea. Beauty is excellence in the aesthetic realm. Truth is excellence in the realm of material things. Goodness is excellence in the moral and ethical realm. They have in common the fact that each is "top of the line" in its own field.

"Be Ye Perfect"

The scriptures often teach us to seek excellence. God is never content with something that is less than it is capable of being. The apostle Paul, for example, wrote to the church at Philippi, "That ye may approve the things that are excellent." (Phil. 1:10--K.J.V). A translation by John Broadus and others puts the same verse in these words, "May distinguish the things that differ." Phillips translates it, "To be able always to recognize the highest and the best." Williams' translation has it, "So that you may always approve the better things." W. J. Conybeare translates the passage, "Teaching you to distinguish good from evil." The New English Bible says it, "May thus bring you the gift of true discrimination."

A similar passage from the pen of the same apostle is Romans 2:18 which reads in the King James Version, "approvest the things that are excellent." The Twentieth Century New Testament puts this passage in these words, "have learnt to appreciate the fine moral distinctions." Phillips' translation reads, "truly to appreciate moral values." Goodspeed says it more simply, "can tell what is right." Both of these scriptures are designed to emphasize that God is not satisfied when we choose anything but the best. That is essentially our message as we talk of beauty, truth and goodness.

If I were to choose only one passage to convey the idea of this message it would have to be Phil. 4:8-9, which reads, "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. The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do: and the God of peace shall be with you."

Beauty

Exactly how does one define beauty? It dawned on me, as I prepared this study, that I had never really defined the word beauty before. After consulting several dictionaries I found this definition in the new Random House Unabridged Dictionary: "Beauty is the quality that is present in a thing or person giving intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind. It arises from sensory manifestations (a shape, color, sound, etc), from a meaningful design or pattern, or from something else (as a personality in which high spiritual qualities are manifest)." Many scenes and experiences of the past come to my mind as I think of this definition. Whatever gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction through the senses is described here as beautiful.

One of the strong convictions which I hold is that God has created, as an act of love for his children, a world of exquisite beauty. I do not believe, for example, that our earth with its beautiful combination of shapes, patterns, designs, colors, sizes, and textures occurred by mere chance, but rather by the careful, creative touch of God. The blue of the sky is just right to be pleasing to our optic nerves. Think of how disturbing it would be if the sky were a bright orange. The green of the leaves is likewise quiet, soothing, and relaxing. Think of how different the effect would be if so great a portion of the world's color were a bright red or purple.

Just here I would like to turn to the opening chapter of the Bible and read from God's description of his creation. The passage begins, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." A moment later we read, "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good ... " (Gen. 1:1-3, 4). This is particularly significant I think. Everything that God created was good, and this includes the idea of beauty as well as the idea of usefulness and other such things.

A few sentences further on, after God has separated land from water, which implies the creation of earth's mountains, valleys, streams, rivers, lakes, and seas, we read again, "And the earth brought forth grass, herbs yielding seed after their kind, and trees

bearing fruit, wherein is the seed thereof, after their kind: and God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:12). Here we think of all the beautiful vegetation that we have seen.

Tennessee In Spring

Just at this time of year the Tennessee landscape is magnificent with the thousands of pink and white dogwoods scattered through the woodland areas. These are enhanced by the thousands of redbud trees that also dot the landscape. Then, too, just at this time of year, there is the delicate new green of the multiplied millions of leaves on all the trees that have so recently come to life. There are the flowers also. I look forward especially each year to the coming of the jonquils, with their fresh appealing yellow hue. Already there are beds of iris that are in full bloom. The tulips with their brilliant colors, also add fresh new color to what has been a bleak winter scene. It is difficult to imagine nature presenting a more beautiful picture than spring presented in the woods and fields of Tennessee. All of this is an evidence of God’s love for his children, manifest in the way that he created the world. With Elizabeth Barrett Browning we are tempted to say, “Oh, Lord, methinks Thou hast made the world too beautiful this year.”

Later in the same first chapter of Genesis we read, “And God made the two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:16-18). Here we think of the beauties of the sunrises and sunsets that we have known over the years. In the early morning and the late afternoon the rays of the sun slant diagonally through our atmosphere in such a way as to present the beautiful reds that make sunrise and sunset so memorable. We also remember the beautiful moonlit nights, with the soft, quiet light of the moon bathing the landscape in beauty. Surely these are further evidence that God’s creation is good.

Yet again in the Genesis record we read, “And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creepeth upon the ground after its kind: and God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:25). A healthy animal is a beautiful thing. A graceful deer slipping away into some distant wood as our car drives along the highway is impressive. A beautiful horse standing erect in some field is a picture that one long remembers. A handsome dog is likewise impressive.

I find pleasure in observing the little puppy that we chose some ten months ago at the animal shelter for our family pet. He has grown into a full-sized dog, with a keen mind, strong muscles, and perfect coordination. It is heart-warming to meet him at the back gate when I come home at the end of the day and feel his love and affection. I am impressed with a dog’s ability to think as I watch him dash quickly to the door sill on the back porch, rise on hind legs, and nuzzle the leather handle of his leash, saying in effect, “Please take me for a walk.” There is disappointment in his brown eyes when I have to say, “No, not this time. There just isn’t time for a walk.” Yet, this is just one of the millions and millions of animals that God has created to populate our earth. There is an impressive beauty in the animal world which God has made.

God’s Crowning Work

Man himself is the most beautiful of all God’s creation. There is nothing more beautiful than a baby, unless it be an older person whose life has followed God’s intended pattern. This week a letter has come from former students of mine who are missionaries on the island of Formosa. They spoke of their new daughter as “the prettiest baby in free China.” This reminds us of the expression in Exodus 2:2 in which Moses’ mother is described “when she saw him that he was a goodly child ...” A fine pure teenage boy or girl is beautiful. A white haired, loving Christian man or woman is beautiful.

Our chapter ends with this summary, “And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31). As we pause and think of the wonderful world in which we live surely this summary is true. It is very good and very beautiful. I wish we might sing more often than we do the beautiful hymn written by Conrad Kocher, which contains the lines,

For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies,
Lord of all, to Thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

There is tragedy in the fact that many people never see the beauty of the world about us. The “dust of daily doings” obscures this exquisite beauty with which God has supplied our earth. Just recently we heard the humorous story of a woman who had returned from another round-the-world trip. She had been gone three months and presumably had seen much of the world’s beauty as she visited one nation after another. A friend asked, “How was your trip?” Her answer, “Terrible. The ship’s manicurist was the worst I have ever seen.” We cannot help but smile in thinking how so tiny and insignificant a matter overshadowed the really significant things of such a world cruise. Yet, this is the story in many of our lives, as we allow tiny unimportant daily irritations to prevent us from seeing and enjoying God’s beautiful world.

A decade or so ago, by way of contrast, I was impressed with the way the C. A. Norreds enjoyed life. I was in the city of Birmingham for a week’s meeting with the West End church. Brother Norred was in semi-retirement, as he and his wife were in their declining years. Yet, that week, as they were invited along with the visiting preacher into one home after another, I was deeply impressed with

the way that they savored everything they saw. As we would sit down to dinner, for example, and I would think that the floral center piece on the table was pretty and give it little further thought. The Norreds would see some particular flower and point out the delicate coloring of the petals, or some other special feature of the floral design before us. When some especially good dish was served they might speak of its aroma and ask the hostess, "How did you ever achieve just this texture or flavor? They saw so much more than most of us were seeing that I was impressed and have long remembered their particular taste for beauty. I especially remember how they relived with such joy some of the travels that they had made in earlier years. I wish that all of us might appreciate and enjoy God's beautiful world as this mature Christian couple did some years ago.

Truth

The second word in our triad is truth. In examining the dictionary definitions for truth I came away with these phrases and words, "conformity with fact or reality ... conformity to the requirements of one's being or nature ... vitality, justice, veracity, steadfastness, sincerity." There were similar words, but these are enough to convey the essential nature of truth. There is something deeply satisfying about facts. They are solid and dependable. They stay put amid the winds of change in our modern world. The well informed, accurate mind is an admirable thing. Then, too, there is an especial beauty in truth telling. Truth is never embarrassed. It can stand its ground under careful scrutiny. It provides a foundation upon which one can build a house, or a life.

As one approaches the Bible he is impressed with the many, many occasions on which truth is held in high esteem. As an example we note Solomon's often quoted sentence "Buy the truth, and sell it not." (Prov. 23:23). In the fourth verse of the 91st Psalm we find the words, "I will say of Jehovah ... His truth is a shield and a buckler." In the second verse of the 117th Psalm there are these words, "The truth of Jehovah endureth forever." The long 119th Psalm in its 151st verse says, "All thy commandments are truth." In the 160th verse of the same Psalm these additional words are found, "The sum of thy word is truth."

In the New Testament one of the most meaningful sentences concerning truth is Christ's pronouncement, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." We pause only for a moment to contemplate the freedom of which Christ spoke. Truth does free man from unwarranted fears. Truth frees man from his own doubts and misgivings. He discovers confidence and certainty as he comes to know more and more truth. Truth frees man from superstition and blind ignorance. God's truth also frees man from aimless wanderings in his life. It gives man an explanation of who he is, where he is going, and how he must live while here. Truth is essential in every important activity of life. We must search and know the truth.

On one occasion Jesus spoke of himself in relationship to truth, "I am the way, the truth and the life," (John 14:6). Some time later he also spoke of truth in relationship to the Holy Spirit in these words, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth." (John 16:13). As yet another example of the way truth is mentioned in the scriptures I would call your attention to Paul's statement in Romans 2:2, where he says, "And we know that the judgment of God is according to truth." The emphasis throughout the scriptures, and the emphasis in all phases of intelligent living, is that man must know the truth and live in proper relationship to the truth. Without a knowledge of truth and a respect for truth no life can be lived wisely or well.

Goodness

The third word in our triad is goodness. The dictionary definition includes these words, "Moral excellence, virtue, integrity, honesty, uprightness, kindness, generosity." We all know what is meant by goodness, yet we find it difficult to discover an adequate definition. Perhaps it helps to say that goodness is like a freshly fallen snow in all its white purity. Or, goodness is like a glass of pure fresh milk that has not been contaminated by any foreign element. Goodness is like a newborn baby, with his complete purity of mind and unspoiled life. Goodness is like clean, fresh linen. It contains the quality of cleanness which is so appealing in all areas of man's existence.

As one thinks of the emphasis in the scriptures upon goodness, his mind is directed to outstanding characters like Joseph in the Old Testament. The account of Joseph's life is especially appealing, because to an unusually high degree he did not allow himself to become contaminated with the moral or religious evil that was around him in Egypt. There is an almost unbelievable strength within him which enabled him to remain free from the temptations and superstitions of that ancient pagan world.

Similarly, we are impressed with the life of Daniel. When King Dairus had set up his world-wide kingdom with its 120 satraps over his many provinces and the three presidents who presided over the satraps, Daniel was chosen to be chief among these three. It is not unexpected to discover that there was jealousy on the part of the others against this Jew who held so high an office. Then comes this tremendous tribute to the life of this young Jewish captive, "Then the presidents and the satraps sought to find an occasion against Daniel as touching the kingdom; but they could find no occasion nor fault, forasmuch as he was faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him. Then said these men, 'We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God.'" (Dan. 6:4-5). Isn't this a marvelous tribute? There was no flaw in his life. The only vulnerability was that Daniel was loyal to Jehovah. Under great pressure and in a far off land Daniel's life was good.

We are also impressed with the New Testament story of Nathaniel, who became one of the Lord's apostles. When he first came to Jesus, our Lord commented concerning him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." (John 1:47). What a tribute this was, since it came from the one being who has ever lived on earth completely without sin and without guile.

There are also many scriptures that point up the importance of goodness. In the long ago Hosea the prophet wrote, as he spoke for God, "For I desire goodness, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (Hos. 6:6). In the Roman letter Paul included these words, "Behold then the goodness and severity of God: toward them that fell, severity; but toward thee, God's goodness, if thou continue in his goodness." In his Galatian letter he named the nine elements that make up the fruit of the Spirit. They include goodness, as we note, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against such there is no law." (Gal. 5:22-23) Both by example and by admonition the scriptures teach us the importance of this quality of goodness.

Conclusion

In our lives the degree of happiness and success which we achieve will, largely depend upon the choices we make. The range of such choices is extremely wide. There are those elements that are evil and obviously bad. Then there are those that are not particularly evil, nor particularly good. Finally, there are those at the top that can be classed as excellent. As we make our choices we determine the direction of our lives and the destiny of our souls. Let us bend every effort to choose the good, the true and the beautiful. May we remember the triad which we have discussed today: Beauty, Truth and Goodness.

It seems obvious that as one seeks for these excellencies he must turn to Christ and follow in his footsteps. In all of Christ's life there was nothing that was not good. There was nothing that was not true. There was nothing that was not beautiful. In everything that he did he portrayed the qualities that we have tried to discuss in this hour. As we seek the beautiful, the true, and the good, instinctively we look upward to him as our guide. It is in coming to Christ, repenting of one's past sins, confessing his name before men, and being baptized into his church that we significantly begin our quest. May each of us begin this quest early and continue it for as long as we live, so that ultimately we may spend eternity in that land of perfect beauty, truth and goodness.