

DECISIONS DETERMINE DESTINY

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 25, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The Bible is a book about people. This is one of the reasons that it is never dull, but always interesting. The scriptures tell the story of all kinds of people, the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the powerful and the weak, the happy and the sad, the good and the bad. From the opening chapter of Genesis through the final chapter of Revelation, God has presented his great truths and eternal principles in vivid, living form, in the lives of thousands of people. When, in the fullness of time, it was God's pleasure to reveal his ultimate truth to mankind, he did it through a person, his only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible is not only a book about people, but it reveals people in the most crucial, climactic moments of their lives. We are introduced to Abraham at the very time when God had called him from Ur of the Chaldees and we are inspired by his acceptance of God's invitation to greatness. We see Joseph at the critical moment of his temptation in Potiphar's house in Egypt, as he displays the inner strength that made him one of God's greatest servants. Job is shown undergoing tremendous pressure through the loss of family and possessions and through the intense physical pain occasioned by his boils, yet he does not break down. In the New Testament we see Peter as he falls in a moment of weakness and as he regains the heights through a lifetime of determination. The Bible never reveals the ordinary, hum-drum events in the lives of its characters, but presents them at the great climactic moments of their lives. It describes them at their moments of greatest decisions.

With this in mind, I now read a brief paragraph found in Mark 10:17-22, which goes as follows: "And as he was going forth into the way, there ran one to him, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? none is good save one, even God. Thou knowest the commandments. Do not kill, Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor thy father and mother. And he said unto him, Teacher, all these things have I observed from my youth. And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest; go, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasures in heaven: and come, follow me. But his countenance fell at the saying, and he went away sorrowful: for he was one that had great possessions."

Analysis of the Text

As we read this passage we discover that Mark refers to the man who came to Jesus simply as "there ran one to him." This is about as concrete, so far as our knowing who the one was, as a piece of blank paper. However, by reading the account in Matthew and Luke, we are able to fill out the whole, vivid picture. Luke 18:18 tells us that he was a ruler. He may have been a member of the council or Sanhedrin, but more likely he was simply a synagogue official. Matthew 19:20 tells us he was young. Luke 18:23 tells us he was very rich. Hence, traditionally this "one" has been known as the rich young ruler. In coming to Jesus, he not only ran, but he "kneeled to him." This suggests an engaging eagerness, an enthusiasm, a zeal. His opening question indicates that he was concerned about eternal life. In our world, today, when so many millions seemingly have so little interest in eternal life, or things of the spirit, it is refreshing to find one who was so eager to know more of eternal life.

In coming to Jesus, the young man addressed him as "Good Teacher," a term which in the original language implies perfect goodness. Jesus responded, "Why callest thou me good" none is good save one, even God." This has been puzzling to Christians down through the centuries. Was Jesus saying that he himself was not good? Was the young man wrong in addressing Jesus as completely Good? Hardly, in view of such passages as Hebrews 4:15, "For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities: but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." If Jesus really was sinless, as we know he was, why does he suggest that the young man should not refer to him as completely good? It appears that the young man was using the ultimate term for perfection too glibly. Jesus was simply telling him that only divinity is perfectly good. Such an address was not appropriate for one less than divine, and this young man did not yet know that Jesus was the divine Son of God. He thought of Jesus as a great teacher and possibly even as a worker of miracles, but nothing about his approach indicates that he worshipped him as divine, hence, while the expression he used was correct, it was not correct for him, because it was beyond his understanding.

Keep the Commandments

According to Matthew, Jesus responded to his basic inquiry, with the words, "If thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments." Jesus then quoted the moral commandments of the Ten Commandments, as we know them from Exodus 12:16, "Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor thy father and mother." Matthew adds, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," which is found in Leviticus 19:18.

At this point, let us pause to observe that the keeping of commandments is absolutely necessary to successful living. There is no alternative to discipline. Notice the prominent emphasis that Jesus gave in this conversation to the importance of obedience to law. In our day this is particularly needed for many chafe at the keeping of commandments. Ours is a day in which children increasingly

disregard the authority of parents. Ours is a day in which, unbelievably, college and university students foment rebellion against their administrators. Some of the most respected universities of the land have been subjected to embarrassing student riots by this spirit of false freedom. Ours is a day in which some march in the streets, openly disregarding law and order, demanding rights. Citizens denouncing their own government are not uncommon. Ours is a day, also, in which literally millions of people openly disregard the laws of God. We cannot read the text of our study today without realizing the wisdom of our Lord in insisting that it is right and proper and necessary to keep the commandments.

The earth commands us to work, or we will not eat. The springtime commands us to sow, or we will not reap a harvest. Man is foolish to think that he can disobey the basic laws of the universe in which he lives. The law of gravity, the law of eating, the law of sleeping, and many other of the laws of nature are to be disregarded only if we wish to ruin ourselves in the process. Similarly, God's other laws, such as the laws of love, kindness, self-control, humility, faith, purity, and respect, must be obeyed. The person who insists upon his freedom to do as he pleases, simply exchanges his obedience to proper laws for enslavement to unwholesome forces. The man who says, "I'll drink if I want to drink," obviously breaks away from the law of self-control, but he does not find himself free. Rather, he finds himself enslaved to a bottle, with consequent disruption of normal, approved behavior. There is no satisfactory alternative to obedience to properly constituted law.

The young man in our story responded, "Teacher, all these things have I observed from my youth." Since he is described as still a young man, he probably means that he has obeyed these laws of God since bar mitzvah, which occurs about the age of twelve in the life of a Jewish boy and is thought of as the time when he assumes adult responsibility for observing the Torah. According to Matthew's account, he then asked, "What lack I yet?" "And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said unto him. One thing thou lackest."

We are impressed with the fact that Jesus loved this young man. The beginning point of Christianity is God's love for mankind (John 3:16), and its continuing emphasis is Christ's love for all men. Christ saw men with a double eye. He saw not only their external physical characteristics, but he also saw what was within them and what they were capable of becoming. As he looked upon this young man, with his unusual talents and abilities, he loved him.

The young man had kept God's laws, but there was something still sadly lacking. Like the apostle Paul, as he revealed the inner conflict of his own life in Romans 7, this young man had kept the law, but he found it inadequate by itself. Keeping commands by themselves will not save a man. As Jesus said on another occasion, "Even so ye also when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do." (Luke 17:10). Something more than mere obedience to law is needed.

The Center of Our Religion

What this young man needed was a love for God so strong that it would become the center of his life. He had kept the commandments in an external way. Undoubtedly he had been at the proper place on Sabbath, had offered the proper sacrifices, and had tithed his possessions. What he had not done was to love God supremely. Jesus, as the great physician, gave him a prescription especially suited to his malady. "Go, sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me." This young man loved his possessions more than he loved his God. The keeping of commandments did not make up for this crucial deficiency.

Two chapters later in this same gospel we read, "And one of the scribes came ... and asked him, What commandment is the first of all? Jesus answered, The first is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." (Mark 12:28-30). The rich, young ruler must put God first in his life and then must follow Christ. He must make everything else second, including his own possessions.

This story has been perplexing to the church down through the ages, for it seems to say that in order to follow Christ one must sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. However, this does not appear to have been taught universally in apostolic times. The answer is found in the fact that Jesus prescribed for this young man according to his special need. He was thinking of the rich young man's need, rather than the need of the poor at this particular moment. An apocryphal, uninspired book, *The Gospel According to the Nazarene*, goes at the problem of explaining this passage in a different way. "And the Lord said to him, How can you say, I have kept the law and the prophets? For it is written in the law, You must love your neighbor as yourself; and see, there are many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, clothed in filthy garments, dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things, and nothing whatever goes out from it to them." (James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 6). But in the inspired accounts of the story attention is not directed primarily to the poor, but toward the rich man, who needed to sacrifice his possessions if he was to have treasure in heaven. The poor need help and therefore Christians must give, but in this story the rich young man must give his possessions in order for his relationship to God to be proper.

The Sad Decision

Our story closes with the words, "But his countenance fell at the saying, and he went away sorrowful: for he was one that had great possessions." In the beginning of the story the young man ran to Christ eagerly, but when he knew the cost of discipleship he went away slowly and sorrowfully. He had come to the watershed, the great continental divide, of his life. He was a young man of great ability and great possibilities. He might have become a John, or a Peter, or a Paul, or a Timothy. Instead he turned backward and became an unknown. He might have written one of the gospel narratives had he made a different decision on this occasion, but instead we do not even know his name. He had resources which the Lord and the Lord's Cause needed, but they would never be used in such a manner. He turned his back upon Jesus. A man's back is never very appealing.

This story comes to its disturbing, tragic climax with a young man of tremendous potential turning his back upon the greatness that was within his grasp and turning back to oblivion. Had he made a different decision he could have become a companion of Christ with all of the blessings that would have entailed. He could have entered upon a period of growth which would have transformed him from the earth-bound rich young ruler that he was into a great spiritual leader like Peter or John. They, too, had begun as ordinary businessmen. Had he made a different decision, he could have made his life count for something. Instead he forfeited all of this for a few parcels of land and a few bags of gold.

The end of the story is disturbing. It is all the more disturbing because there have been countless thousands of others who have been invited by Christ to come and follow him, but who have turned their backs upon him to their eternal regret. Through all the centuries of the Christian era, there have been those who have followed in the steps of the rich young ruler, turning away from greatness toward eternal regret.

There have been others, however, who like Peter and Paul and John have accepted the invitation and have moved upward toward eternal salvation. In our day each of us receives the invitation to follow Christ. We must make a choice and that choice will determine our destiny. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart. Let that faith in Christ go so deep that it pulls you away from the things of the world with all of their momentary enticements. Turn from the world toward Christ and his way. Confess your faith in him as the divine Son of God. Be buried with your Lord in baptism and then begin to walk in newness of life. Decisions determine destiny. The decision that you are making now will determine where you spend eternity. As we sing the Lord's invitation will you feel the pull of his divine love and will you accept his call to eternal salvation?