

DISCERNING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 17, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

During Christ's life on earth many people asked him many questions. Their questions and the answers he gave are almost always interesting. In the opening verses of Matthew 16, we find this reading, "And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and trying him, asked him to show them a sign from heaven. But he answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the heaven is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the heaven is red and lowering. You know how to discern the face of the heavens; but ye cannot discern the signs of the times." (Matt. 16:1-3).

The people of Jesus' day were intelligent and astute in discerning the weather, but they were blind when it came to recognizing the most significant thing that ever happened on earth. They failed to comprehend the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Although they were keen-minded, intelligent people, the Jews blundered grossly because they were unable to discern the signs of the times.

In Our Day, Too

In the twentieth century modern man also shows a tendency not to be able to recognize the real issues of our own generation. There is no question but that man in the twentieth century has reached the heights in the manipulation of the physical world for his own pleasure and comfort. Witness the progress in space exploration, the achievements in travel, the developments in communication, and the general raising of the standard of living. Twentieth century man is almost a genius, but he often misses completely the real purpose of life. Like the Jews of old, he can discern the face of the heavens, but because of his spiritual blindness he fails to discern the signs of the times.

We are often so close to something that we cannot see it. Perhaps you have had the experience of standing in front of a map in which there are hundreds of names, some of which are very small and others of which are very large. It is not an uncommon experience to look for a certain name for a long period of time only to discover that it is so large that you had simply passed over it. Or to take another example, sometimes we do not properly appreciate the physical growth of our own children until someone who has not seen them for a time remarks, "My, how your children have grown." We are so close to them, seeing them every day, that we fail to realize the rather striking growth that has taken place. Even in rapidly changing times, such as our own century, changes are so slight and events establish a trend so gradually that we often do not take notice. It is a bit like the daylight fading gradually into the dusk and on into the darkness of night. There is never a time when we can quite say that daylight has now ended and darkness has now begun. In similar vein, it is easy to be a part of a drift or a trend or a development without realizing that it is taking place.

Materialism--Threat to Our World

In the 1962 Cole Lectures at Vanderbilt University, Dr. Ernest C. Caldwell spoke in a most forthright fashion concerning the drift toward materialism in our day. Mr. Ed Willingham, Religious Editor of the Nashville Tennessean, reported the final lecture in the series on March 29, 1962 as follows, "Dr. Caldwell said, 'The fascinating lure of possessions is most damning' in areas where the possessions may be obtained. 'In Jesus' day,' he said, 'It was unlikely that the poor could become rich. There was little social mobility. But in this country today, all sorts of possessions are a possibility for the vast majority. The Advertisers, aided by this broader diffusion of wealth, have triumphed over us. They have made us all covetous. None of us can get into the kingdom any easier than the camel can crawl through the needle's eye. We have been convinced by television, radio, and the printed page that a man's life does consist of the multitude of his possessions. We want more and more.'

"He said this condition convinced him that the teaching of Jesus on possessions was never more needed anywhere, than it is needed in America today. If Communism ever overcomes us, it will only be after we have sold our souls to money and substituted the worship of things for the worship of God. Our vital and immediate need is to listen to the teachings of Jesus on possessions.'"

Arnold Toynbee

Arnold Toynbee, the noted British historian and perhaps the world's greatest living historian, recently launched an attack against the whole institution of advertising in a challenging article in *Printers' Ink*. He advanced three reasons why he believed that advertising was a curse to mankind rather than a blessing. First, he argued that advertising encourages man to have more and more desires and to do everything possible to satisfy those desires, whereas Christianity teaches man to control and to limit his desires. In the second place, he argued that advertising is not dedicated to truth telling, but rather to telling what will make a profit. In the third place, he argued that advertising leads people into a habit pattern of life and a frame of thinking where they do not think for themselves, but follow the directions of any prominent voice. As a result, a climate of thinking is created which ideally suits the purpose of a dictator. After a long program of mass advertising, a population is an easy prey to the propaganda manipulations of a dictator.

While it may be that Mr. Toynbee has overstated the case, it is intensely interesting to ponder the effect of modern advertising upon the materialism of our present generation. The desire for more and better houses, cars, clothing, and the limitless list of luxuries known in our day has certainly been a step away from the spiritual emphasis of biblical times toward the materialistic, sensual emphasis of the twentieth century.

In this connection it is interesting to recall two stories told recently by Joe Gray, minister for the Church of Christ in Valdosta, Georgia, immediately after he had spent a month in New Zealand, surveying the possibilities of mission work there. He told of trying to send a cablegram home to his wife immediately upon his arrival in Wellington, New Zealand. He had arrived on a holiday and the operator insisted that it was all but impossible to send a message on a holiday, because the cost was "too dear." After some discussion he was told that if he could wait until the following day the cost would be just half, and when he rejected this idea, the operator urged him to wait until after six P.M. when the cost would be twenty-five percent less. Finally, he insisted that he needed to send a cablegram at once and was told that the cost would be \$4.50. It is rather strange to our ears that a telegraph operator would try to talk a client out of sending a cablegram, simply because it was "too dear."

The second story was very similar to the first. He told of his going into a shop with a friend who wished to buy an electric transformer. The shopkeeper explained that while he had five on the shelf in clear view, he hesitated to sell them because they were "too dear." Finally, when the shopkeeper realized that he had failed to dissuade his customer, he then urged him to go down the street to a competitor's shop where there was a similar used transformer on sale. He explained, "If you must buy, why don't you buy this second-hand one that will save you money." These stories do not sound like America in the twentieth century, but there is something a bit refreshing about this kind of concern on the part of a shopkeeper for a customer.

Christ's Teaching on Materialism

With the above discussion as a background, let us now listen to the Lord's teaching concerning material things. Let us begin with Luke 12:15-21, which reads, "Take heed, and keep yourselves from all covetousness, for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he reasoned with himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my grain and my goods. (It might be well for us to pause for a moment to recognize the fact that this operation was both honest and praiseworthy to this point. This is a story of a farmer who had been unusually efficient and successful in his farming operation. Not only did he have a plentiful crop on this occasion, but for several years back. He is not to be censured or blamed for efficiency and success in his work. His mistake came only in that his material concerns had crowded out the greater spiritual needs of his life). And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be? So is he that layeth up treasures for himself, and is not rich toward God."

Turning to the sermon on the mount, we find Christ saying, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also ... But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt. 6:19-21, 33).

In II Cor. 4:16 the apostle Paul contrasts the "outward man" and the "inner man." The emphasis in the New Testament is always on the inner man. For example, in Eph. 3:16 the same apostle Paul prays not for prosperity, health, or other concerns of the outer or external man, but rather that "ye may grow in strength through the Spirit in the inner man." The spirit of our century is to spend almost all of our time, concern, and money on the outer man, and to neglect almost completely the needs of the inner man.

This entire subject is seen graphically when we read Paul's admonitions to Timothy, "But godliness with contentment is great gain: for we brought nothing into the world, and neither can we carry anything out; but having food and covering we shall be therewith content. They that are minded to be rich fall into a temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown man in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil: but some reaching after have been led astray from the faith, and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on the life eternal, whereunto thou wast called and didst confess the good confession in the sight of many witnesses." (I Tim. 6:6-12).

Conclusion

Nowhere does the Bible teach us that man is to bury his talent and forego the opportunities of succeeding in any legitimate line of work. Rather, God would have us to use our abilities and to be as successful in every honorable undertaking as we possibly can be. It is right for a businessman to make money--to make all of the money that he can honorably and scripturally make--and then it is right for him to use the product of his efforts in the service of God. The same applies to professional men and all others. The talents that

God has given us we must use, but we must not let the material achievements that those talents bring about become central in our lives.

Modern man often worships things. In fact, this is the most common idolatry of the twentieth century. Fewer and fewer people throughout the world are bowing before images of Buddha and the other traditional gods. Unfortunately, more and more people are bowing before the god of material things. Idolatry is the placing of some other thing in the central shrine of man's heart and giving it his first allegiance. In this sense materialism is idolatry.

Just here we need to remember the great commandments of the Bible. The ten commandments begin with the words, "I am Jehovah thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, not any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, nor that is in the earth beneath, nor that is in the water that is under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them." (Ex. 20:2-5). In the New Testament Jesus pointed out as the greatest of all the commandments the "Shema" of the Old Testament in these words, "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. 12:29-30).

First place in our lives must belong to God. His Cause must have the primary concern of our hearts. Material things fill an important place in life, but they must not be the heart and center of our concern and our devotion. Materialism is no new sin, for it has been known through all the centuries of man's existence on earth. In our time it has become more widespread and has been extended both to the masses of the people and, through the availability of more creature comforts, it has been deepened in its hold upon the lives of men. This trend, felt in the lives of Christians, must be recognized as one of the "Signs of the times." Let us hear the admonition of the apostle John, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (I John 2:15).