

“LES MISERABLES”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 13, 1959 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

Undoubtedly all of us have had the experience of inviting someone to come to worship with us, only to discover that he was not very interested in coming. Sometimes he may have come in order to be polite or considerate, but he has indicated in one way or another that he really did not enjoy the experience. We have often wondered why. A great deal of the answer is in the basic fact that those who are not God's children, but who are living a different kind of life, find themselves rather uncomfortable in his presence. A man who knows something of Christianity and what it requires, but who is not in agreement with it, inevitably will find the singing of hymns and the praying of prayers an unpleasant and embarrassing experience.

In the very first example of man's life on earth we find Adam and Eve getting along well with God until they broke one of God's commandments. Then immediately we read that they tried to hide. The moment that they had gone a different way from God's way, they felt the desire to run away from God. The story of Jonah in the Old Testament is another classic example of the same thing. Jonah, evidently was a very good man. Undoubtedly he had preached the truths of God widely, but when God called on him to go to the city of Ninevah, to preach to the people, Jonah decided not to go. Then, immediately, he felt the need to run away from God.. so he endeavored to find a ship that would take him to one of the far corners of the earth.

The Miserable Ones

When a man is not doing what God wants him to do, it is very natural to be uncomfortable in God's presence. Reading the Bible and engaging in prayer are wonderful things to those of us who are Christians, but to the man whose life is worldly and whose motives are not Christ's motives, reading the Bible and praying are unwelcome experiences. When man does not do what God wants, man is unhappy and even miserable. A sentence from Augustine has impressed me very deeply, “Our souls are never at rest until they find rest in Thee.” That is a basic truth. Man is never really happy until he makes peace with God and until he goes God's way. As long as he fights against God, as long as he resists God's upward pull, he is miserable.

The French poet and dramatist, Victor Hugo, wrote a famous play with the title “Les Miserables.” Those words, when translated into English, mean “the miserable ones.” I am suggesting that all of the misery in our world is either directly or indirectly a result of man's resistance to God. Misery entered into our world with the sin of Adam and Eve. After they had sinned and were cast out of the wonderful garden of Eden they had to earn their living by the sweat of their face. There was not the same peace or enjoyment of life that there had been before sin came. Through them came the deluge of sin into the world. The waywardness of the people of Noah's time was the culmination of sin in that first long period of man's living on the earth. The misery that those people suffered when the flood snuffed out their lives was a result of their resisting God. When man cooperates with God and lets God have his way with him, man finds that deep peace of soul that Augustine was speaking of and that all of us desire.

You will not misunderstand me to be saying that all sinners are miserable now. There are a great many who are happy in their sins. This is because they have become calloused, their consciences have been seared, and they are almost completely insensitive to spiritual values. I have known a few such people and I am sure there are many in our world. They are not miserable because their consciences are seared and they give no thought to spiritual things.

Some years ago the world's tallest man was a man by the name of Robert Wedlow. He died long before a man normally dies. The reason for his death was that he had a blister on his heel, and that blister became infected and caused his death. You ask, “Why didn't he do something about it?” There was a rather unusual circumstance in his makeup. He had no pain-endings in that particular foot. He did not feel the blister; he did not know an infection had started, until it was too late.

I believe that God put pain-endings in us in order that we may feel danger. With the cut of a finger we are immediately alarmed and do something to stop the flow of blood, thereby saving our lives. In other ways pain-endings help us realize danger and do something about it. In exactly the same way God embeds in us a feeling that makes us uncomfortable when we are in opposition to him. Call it conscience, or whatever you like. God puts into us when we begin life the capacity to feel pain when we go the wrong way.

On Purpose

When Christ came to the earth he purposely disturbed man. This seems strange because we ordinarily think of Christ as bringing peace. Yet in one sense Christ came to disturb man. On one occasion he said, “Think not that I came to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.” Is not that strange language to come from the Prince of Peace? “For I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law: and a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. He that

findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.” (Matt. 10:34-39). “I came not to send peace, but a sword.”

What this scripture means can be put like this. Man is here on earth, and he has become complacent. He is in sin but he has made peace with sin. He has come to feel that sin is all right, and is comfortable in his sins. Christ came to pull man free from the degradation of sin that had fastened about his soul. That kind of operation cannot be done painlessly. Christ came, not to send peace, not to leave people satisfied in their lost condition, but to wrench them free and thereby to lift them up to a higher plane of living.

Following Christ is never easy. It is not drifting downstream, slowly, comfortably, easily. It is not walking down hill. Following Christ is climbing, climbing from the muck and the mire of sin to the heights of righteousness. We do not do that without struggle. Work is involved, effort is involved, and nearly always it begins when man feels pain. Man becomes disturbed about himself; man realizes that there is something wrong and desires something better. I do not believe a man can really become a Christian, at least after he is old enough to be called all adult, without feeling a struggle as he turns loose of his sins and starts to climb toward heaven.

Pain Precedes A New Start

I have seen somewhere a little paragraph from Clovis Chappel, in which he tells about one of his childhood experiences. When he was a little boy, seven years old or a little older, he had learned certain skills. One of them was riding a horse; another was the ability to swim quite well. He was very proud of these manlike, outdoor things. He and his family went to visit another family, and in this family there was a little girl just about his age. Proudly he told her of his skills: he could swim, he could ride, he could do things. She could not do any of them ... but she could read. He could not read. He had never been interested in reading, but when she could read and he could not, he was disturbed. As he wrote of it many years later, this man who eventually came not only to read but to write many books, he said the pain that came when he realized that she, his own age, could read and he could not, immediately set him to work to learn to read. I have seen that same thing in my own life and in the lives of others. We do not really begin to change our lives until we are disturbed; we do not really begin to climb toward heaven until we become painfully dissatisfied with where we are.

God puts pain-endings in our fingers and all over our body, so that when we are hurt we will know it and do something about it. I believe that God puts pain-endings in our souls, so to speak, so that when we are out of step with him we will feel it and not be happy nor comfortable. We will want to do something to get in step with God.

Always Agreeable?

Parallel with this theme that we have been thinking of is another one that I have wanted to talk with you about. It is the idea that we can be too agreeable. Man can too easily fit into his own world and be satisfied with the things about him. We have said that already. He needs to be disturbed and get out of his rut of sin and climb to the heights so he can be saved. Man can conform too fully to the circumstances about him. We teach our children to be agreeable. We want them to fit in, we want them to work pleasantly with others, we want them to be the kind of people who can adjust to any situation. Isn't that what we tell them; isn't that what we were taught? All of that is good. We need to be adjustable, to be tractable, to be agreeable, but it poses a great problem. Down the road of life there are going to be places where we ought not to adjust, but where we ought simply to stand aloof. Normally, with things that have to do with our own personal preferences, things that have to do merely with this world, we must go along, be agreeable, be tractable and fit in, but there are other things--matters of wrong versus right--where we dare not fit in.

Christ did not always fit in. In things of a personal nature he was the most agreeable of all men, but there were some things in which he was not agreeable at all. That day, for instance, when he walked into the temple square and saw the men changing money, selling animals for sacrifice, and robbing the people, he was not agreeable. Everybody was passing by. They were going on and nobody was taking notice. Then suddenly Christ came and righteous indignation flooded through him. He turned over their money tables and opened their cages. He did not fit in that day. While we need to be the most agreeable of all people in all things about which it is right to be agreeable, Christians are people who do not fit in whenever that fitting in means compromise on the truths of God.

In the ninth chapter of Matthew Jesus uses two illustrations, “No man putteth a piece of undressed cloth upon an old garment; for that which should fill it up taketh from the garment, and a worse rent is made. Neither do men put new wine into old wineskins; else the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins perish: but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.” (Matt. 9:16-17). Christ was saying simply that the teaching that he came to give would not fit into the old forms of paganism and Judaism, so he swept them away and gave a whole new system.

A Peculiar People

I am not saying that we need to be different, just in order to be different. I have recently been reading of the Amish people who do not ride in cars, who still wear old bonnets and Mother Hubbard dresses. I am not speaking of being peculiar, just in order to be peculiar, but, while Christians are to be complacent and agreeable in everything that they can, where truths and principles are involved, I they must be different. This applies in more places than we have time now to discuss, but we can name a few areas. It applies to the whole realm of ethics and moral values. It applies to the matter of profanity. How can a Christian sit and silently tolerate the use of God's

name in vain by a companion, when he believes that Christ is the Savior of the world and honors God as the Creator of the universe? Can we be complacent when profanity is all about us?

What about modern dress? Can Christian women just drift along and dress like non-Christian women whose modesty is certainly not apparent? Do not Christian women have to stand aloof in the modesty of their clothing and in their chaste behavior? In the choosing of our amusements, do we not have to be different? This is why we encourage our young people not to engage in the heavy petting that is so common among teen-agers of our day. Christian young people must be cleaner and purer than the non-Christian young people of the world. This is also why we encourage our young people not to engage in the intimacies of the modern dance. It is harmful to them spiritually. We Christians must be different in choosing our vocations and where we live. We must be different wherever principles are involved. We must be cleaner of life, purer of speech, higher of motives, more dedicated to the things that are eternal.

Conclusion

God wants us to be disturbed, lest we go along with the current and be like the world. He wants us to be agreeable wherever we can, but he wants us to be different where principles are involved. As Paul said, "Be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Rom. 12:2).

At the close of this lesson we ask, "Would you be a Christian?" Everything that Christ taught points upward toward God. Will you follow his teaching? Will you be disturbed enough to leave the sins of the world and accept him as your Savior? Repent of your sins, be buried with him in baptism and go on your way rejoicing! Come now.