

KEEPERS OF THE SPRINGS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 4, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

“Once upon a time,” began a story by Peter Marshall, “a certain town grew up at the foot of a mountain range. It was sheltered in the lee of the protecting heights, so that the wind that shuddered at the doors and flung handfuls of sleet against the window panes was a wind whose fury was spent. High up in the hills, a strange and quiet forest dweller took it upon himself to be the Keeper of the Springs. He patrolled the hills and wherever he found a spring, he cleaned its brown pool of silt and fallen leaves, of mud and mold and took away from the spring all foreign matter, so that the water which bubbled up through the sand ran down clean and cold and pure. It leaped, sparkling over rocks and dropped joyously in crystal cascades until, swollen by other streams, it became a river of life to the busy town.”

Marshall went on to tell how that in an economy mood the town fathers decided not to continue to pay the Keeper of the Springs, thinking that his work was of no significance. The result was that the pools soon became clogged with leaves and silt and slime. The water did not flow as freely as before and even that which did reach the town was not as pure and clean. Because of the lack of water the town and the valley began to die. Only then did the people realize their mistake. Marshall’s story concluded, “Again they sought out the Keeper of the Springs and begged him to return to his former joyous labor. Gladly he agreed, and once more the pools began to send their pure water liltling down the mountain sides.”

There can be no survival for mankind without pure water and pure air and pure food. As a nation we are just beginning to realize just how much pollution has been dumped into our environment. We are discovering this huge problem almost too late. Our beautiful forest lands and ocean sides have been misused and made ugly. Fires have devastated vast areas. Discarded bottles, cans and junk automobiles have become painfully apparent. The air we breathe has been dangerously contaminated by harmful dust, soot, smoke and chemical gasses. The produce of the soil has been contaminated by deadly insecticides. The fruit and vegetables and meats which come to our tables are not as pure as once they were. Most of our streams, rivers and lakes have been badly damaged by the waste of our cities. Especially has industrial waste been a blight to many of our streams. The pollution of our natural environment has become a major problem of our time,

Streams and Oceans

In a recent issue *Time Magazine* had an article entitled “The Mercury Mess,” which contained these sentences, “Only a few months ago, mercury pollution was thought to be a problem confined mainly to the Great Lakes region. It has since turned up in thirty-three states. Because millions of pounds of lethal metal have been dumped into the nation’s waterways within the past twenty years, tainting untold numbers of fish, officials in ten states have closed down some commercial fisheries. Public health workers in 16 states have warned residents against eating fish or fowl from suspect waterways ... Agency officials realize that mercury changes its potency in water; through a complex chemical reaction, the relatively harmless inorganic form is transformed into deadly methyl mercury. Minute amounts are picked up by micro-organisms, which are then eaten by small fish, which in turn are eaten by large predatory fish like pike and pickerel. When humans eat these fish, they can receive dosages of methyl mercury massive enough to cause blindness, brain damage, and even death.”

In the same issue of *Time Magazine*, there was a second story on “The Dying Oceans.” Jacques Yves Cousteau, the world famed underwater explorer who has covered some 155,000 miles of sea on film-making and oceanographic expeditions during the past three and one-half years, spoke out in glum, blunt terms, “The oceans are in danger of dying. The pollution is general ... People do not realize that all pollution ends up in the seas. The earth is less polluted. It is washed by the rain which carries everything into the oceans, where life has diminished by 40% in twenty years. Fish disappear. Flora too ... ” This last figure is staggering indeed. If life in the ocean has diminished by 40% in the past score of years, one shudders to think of what may come in the years ahead.

As we contemplate the severe problem of pollution, we seek for the causes. Primarily, there are two: ignorance and selfishness. Through the centuries, man has been polluting his environment without any real understanding of the magnitude of the problem. In recent years this has changed rapidly. Press, radio, and television have carried not only alarming statements by qualified leaders, but also the actual statistics of the frightening pollution problem. As a result, ignorance of the problem is diminishing and should vanish entirely. On the other hand, selfishness is a more difficult cause to eliminate. So many people are quite willing to dispose of unwanted industrial waste in the most economical manner, though it may be hurtful to fish and fowl in nearby streams. Similarly, many people seem to be unmindful of the devastation they wreak on forests and wild life. Their own immediate enjoyment seems to take precedence over concern for future generations. The exhausting of natural resources, and the problem of pollution, thus become moral issues, which demand spiritual motivation for solutions.

Other Kinds of Pollution

In addition to the pollution of our natural environment, there are other kinds of pollution which are deeply disturbing. For example, moral pollution has increased greatly during the past score of years. "Situation Ethics," or "the New Morality," has greatly lessened respect for ethical and moral principles. Behavior has worsened noticeably under the encouragement of this ideology, which questions the rightness of Christian morality. Stage plays and books have for many years contained that which was illicit and indecent. In recent years, however, the risqué and questionable have been replaced by that which is out-and-out immoral and indecent. Movies have also progressed downward during the past score of years. That which was immodest gave way to that which was indecent, which in turn gave way to that which is immoral. The old Motion Picture Code, while not perfect by any means, was infinitely better than the license that is now allowed.

Recently I was disturbed by reading this note: "The constitutional right of men to 'marry' each other is being advocated in a lawsuit brought by ... a law student at the University of Minnesota and a librarian ... " One minister of an extremely liberal church indicated that he had performed two such "marriages."

Justice Elijah Adlow, who serves on the bench of one of the courts in Boston, Mass, recently said, "I refuse to live by the rules made by men who have lost their heads by being elevated too high. The Supreme Court has put its endorsement on filth, and we in this city (Boston) will continue to entertain a little decency." An editorial in the *Dallas Times Herald* commented "Justice Adlow's defiance reflects a formal expression of the feelings and opinions of a vast number of American citizens ... A big majority of normal folk are being pushed around by endless court maneuverings built upon thin, personal opinions handed down by some members of the Supreme Court. It is this majority of five, sometimes more, that interprets 'art' and 'social value' into filthy films and dirty publications ... It breeds permissiveness that is gnawing at a nation's morals."

#### The Pollution of Violence

A second area of pollution especially disturbing in our day is the pollution of violence which is sweeping the world. *U. S. News and World Report* in a recent issue has an article entitled "Violence--A Worldwide Problem." In this article recent incidents of violence are listed in such widely separated countries as Holland, Britain, Ireland, Wales, Italy, Guatemala, Brazil, Canada, India, and the Philippine Islands. The acts of violence mentioned includes such things as skyjacking of planes, student violence on campus, racial riots accompanied by burning and plundering, the bombing of buildings, and the kidnapping of officials.

Our own country has the whole spectrum of violence. Recently I watched the evening news as it reported the story of how a spectator pulled a gun in a Los Angeles court. He freed the defendants, then took five hostages, including the judge, and was able to leave in a waiting get-a-way van. A few minutes later the police established a road block on a well-known Los Angeles street which resulted in a gun battle, the results of which were four dead, including the judge.

Another recent incident involved a Nobel Prize winner who was working on cancer research. He returned to his laboratory to find his experimental rats and mice had been vandalized. The cages were open and some of the animals had been thrown through an open window into a sea nearby, while others were running about the floor and many others were lost.

Yet another incident was that of a city policeman who responded to an emergency call of a woman who screamed into the telephone that she was in danger. Upon arrival he found the house empty, but a suitcase had been left behind. When he touched the suitcase it exploded with a bomb inside which cost him his life. Surely it is understatement to say that the pollution of violence is a blot on 20th century society.

#### Religious Pollution

Yet another kind of pollution is found in the realm of religious faith and doctrine. There has been a growth during the past score of years in anti-religious sentiment. The denial of the existence of God, the denial of the divinity of Christ, and the denial of the inspiration of the Bible have been encouraged. The validity of Christian moral and ethical standards has been widely questioned. Further, God has been completely ignored in the explanation of the origin of the world, of life in general, and of man. Millions of young people have no conception of God as the Creator of the universe and of man, and no respect for the standards which God sets for man's behavior. Unless this kind of pollution is somehow reduced the road ahead looks dismal indeed for society.

A book published in England a few years ago, written by a widely known theologian, includes such sentences as, "In the last century a painful step forward was taken in the recognition that the Bible does contain myths, and that this is an important form of religious truth. It was gradually acknowledged ... that the Genesis stories of the Creation and Fall were representations of the deepest truths about man and the universe in the form of myth rather than history ... "

In a leading book on Situation Ethics we read, "Nothing can of itself always be labeled as 'wrong.' One cannot, for instance, start from the position 'sex relations before marriage' or 'divorce' are wrong or sinful in themselves. They may be in ninety-nine cases or even one hundred cases out of a hundred, but they are not intrinsically so, for the only intrinsic evil is lack of love ... Are we not entitled to say that, depending on the situation, those who break the Seventh Commandment of the old law could be doing a good thing--if it is for love's sake, for the neighbor's sake? In short, is there any real 'law' of universal weight? The situationists think not."

These attitudes denying the creativity of God in the forming of the universe and denying the existence of absolute moral truth constitute a distributing kind of pollution in the religious realm.

### The Scriptures Speak

In view of the climate of thinking of our 20th century and especially in view of such things as we have just discussed, I find it both reassuring and necessary to turn again to the scriptures. Listen with me to some of the words of instruction written by the apostle Paul to the young preachers Timothy and Titus: "For the time will come when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but having itching ears, will heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables." (II Tim, 4:3-5). "Hold the pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee guard through the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in us." (II Tim. 1:13-14). "This charge I commit unto thee, my child Timothy, according to the prophecies which led the way to thee, that by them thou mayest war the good warfare; holding faith and a good conscience; which some having thrust from them made shipwreck concerning the faith," (I Tim. 1:18). "Speak thou the things which befit the sound doctrine." (Titus 2:1). "Though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema." (Gal. 1:8). For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us, to the intent that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world." (Titus 2:11-12). "Let everyone that nameth the name of the Lord depart from unrighteousness." (II Tim. 2:19). "Know ye not that ye are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, and such are ye." (I Cor. 3:16-17).

### Conclusion

In a recent publication there was a picture of a banana peel lying on the sidewalk. Over it was the question "Would you pick it up?" Forty six people saw this situation and passed by, doing nothing, though they may have silently hoped that no one would step on the banana peel and fall. The forty-seventh person stopped and picked it up. This gives us some insight into the cause of much of our pollution problem. So many are willing to leave problems for someone else to solve. We desperately need to turn our concern into action.

We began this message by talking about water. Christ often spoke of water: "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up into eternal life." (John 4:14). "Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." (John 7:37). "... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely." (Rev. 21:6). "The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And he that heareth, let him say, Come. And he that is athirst, let him come: he that will, let him take of the water of life freely." (Rev. 22:17). The spiritual water of life is the most precious commodity known to man, and it is our responsibility to insist that we keep it pure and clean. Only when we stay close to the source of spiritual light, the inspired scriptures, can we be sure that we are keepers of the springs.