

EVERY GOOD GIFT FROM ABOVE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 1, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In the August 30, 1963 issue of the *Atlanta Constitution*, in his regular front-page column, Ralph McGill wrote as follows, "America, having joined technology and science with agriculture, knows no lean years. They all are fat ... too fat, indeed, for the domestic economy. Surpluses on hand are at once the despair and opportunity. Research is at work on how to turn some of the amassed products into new items of food, fiber, oils and industrial products. Internationally, food has political and humanitarian uses, but still the cribs are filled.

"As autumn neared, the major surpluses on hand were these: one and two-tenths billion bushels of wheat. Six million tons of feed grains. Seven to eight hundred million pounds of tobacco. About eleven million bales of cotton. There were, of course, surpluses in butter, cheese, dried milk, and other foods. The nation's symbolic cribs are filled to overflowing. Men make comfortable livings out of rentals for warehouses, elevators, and other storage facilities for the nation's plenty.

"The miracle of science-in-agriculture is further highlighted by the fact that in the past few years twenty-five million acres have been taken out of production and given over to pastures and the 'farming' of trees for pulp. An additional twenty-five million acres similarly were subtracted from the feed grain program. Our vast production in food and fiber comes from fifty million fewer acres.

"Nor is this all. Agricultural economists in the Department of Agriculture inform us that by 1980 (a mere seventeen years away) fifty million fewer acres of land will feed the expanded population, which by then will have reached two hundred millions. Our technology and the findings of scientific research are able to multiply production faster than the increased demands of consumers.

"Images come to us. Most of them are sentimental. There were the early pilgrims who learned from the Indians to plant patches of corn. The pioneers felled trees and scratched out a few small fields of Indian vegetables and the stony-grained maize. The mule and the horse pulled plows, cutting long rows across the vast fields of the prairies and the hard-cleared land of the uplands and the Piedmont lands. The harrow came and the big plows. The tractor was a revolution. Then the scientist with his hybrids, the miraculous fertilizers, the insecticides, freezing, packaging, distribution ... and the future?"

Stark Contrast

In stark contrast to the above, Tom Tune, one of our missionaries in Hong Kong, writes in the missionary magazine, *Challenge*, as follows: "Over 500,000 people live in squatter huts in Hong Kong. More than 150,000 live in bed spaces. In the day they are rented by night workers and at night by day workers. More than 60,000 live on roof tops and about 50,000 in shops, garages, corridors and staircases. Nearly 70,000 live in verandahs and cocklofts, 12,000 in basements, 10,000 in stalls and caves, and about 30,000 people in boats and hulks. There are as many as 3,000 living on one acre of land, and in one six acre tract there are over 100,000. More than 20,000 people in Hong Kong have no housing of any kind. They sleep in the street. Each night they wander around waiting until after nine o'clock when the shops close so they can put up their 'beds' outside the doors."

For some time I have intended presenting these two contrasting pictures, along with other principles on the general theme of Thanksgiving. It had been my plan to present this message on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving day, however, in view of our national grief upon the death of the late President Kennedy, it seemed inappropriate last Sunday to discuss this theme. Accordingly, I present it today at the end of the Thanksgiving period, for I feel that it is an emphasis that we particularly need in our day.

Our Reaction to Our Bounty

The reaction of many millions of people to the unprecedented abundance of our day is a pre-occupation with the material blessings themselves. Surrounded on every hand by the abundant necessities of life and even by many of the luxuries of life, modern America is so concerned with this material abundance that it can see or think of nothing else. It might be likened to a group of children suddenly invited to a watermelon feast by a generous father. As the melons are cut the little wide-eyed youngsters are completely oblivious to the generous donor, so great is their concentration upon the watermelons themselves. As each receives his cut he turns away completely engrossed in the matter at hand, completely unmindful of the giver. It might even be likened to puppies at feeding time, eagerly gobbling down their food unmindful of the one who has provided it. Even perhaps more vivid is a picture of hogs at feeding time, concerned only about the trough of food, unconcerned about the giver.

Christ's story of the rich farmer, as we read it in Luke 12:13-21, is much the same story. Here, a farmer who had been blessed with previous bountiful crops had accumulated an abundance beyond his own needs. To store this abundance he had built barns. Then, he was blessed with still another bumper crop. Unmindful of God who had given him his blessings, and equally unmindful of the needs of his fellowmen, he decided to tear down his barns and build greater in order that he might store his bounty. "But God said unto him,

Thou foolish one, this night thy soul required of thee: and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be?" (Luke 12:20). This attitude of preoccupation with the material blessings about us is wrong and sinful.

The second possible reaction to our bounty is one of awareness and appreciation of the giver. It is just here that I wish to introduce our text, which we find in James 1:17: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning." It is right and proper that we lift our eyes from the abundance about us to the God who gave every good and perfect gift. Our comparison here is to a girl who has just received an engagement ring. As the beautiful gold band and the diamond set within it sparkle on her finger, she is grateful for the gift, but even more concerned for the one who has given her the gift. As much as the ring might mean, the young man who has loved her enough to ask her to be his wife means more. Apart from him the ring means little. In similar vein, when we survey the riches of the world let us lift our eyes to heaven and contemplate the God who loved us enough to give this great procession of gifts.

The Psalms

When we think in terms of giving thanks unto God, our minds go back to the Old Testament to the writings of David. Here are a few highlights from his Psalms. "I will give thanks unto Jehovah with my whole heart; I will show forth all thy marvelous works. I will be glad and exult in thee; I will sing praise to thy name, O thou most high." (Ps. 9:1-2). Again he wrote, "Gracious is Jehovah, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful. Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for Jehovah hath dealt bountifully with thee. For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of Jehovah." (Ps. 116:5, 7-8, 17).

Still again David wrote: "Bless Jehovah, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless Jehovah, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy desire with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle. Jehovah is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness. Bless Jehovah, O my soul." (Ps. 103:1-5, 8, 22).

Finally, I would quote David's one hundredth Psalm, "Make a joyful noise unto Jehovah, all ye lands. Serve Jehovah with gladness; come before his presence with singing. Know ye that Jehovah, he is God; it is he that hath made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: Give thanks unto him, and bless his name. For Jehovah is good; his lovingkindness endureth forever, and his faithfulness unto all generations."

Symbols of His Love

We do not see God, but we do see the evidences of his love for us. We do not see Christ, but we know that he is concerned for our good. God's gifts are symbols of his love for us. The material, physical blessings which God and Christ have showered upon us are evidences of their love for us.

In Mark 2:1-13, we read the story of a palsied man who was brought to Christ and lowered through the roof into the room where Christ was teaching. Christ said, "Son, thy sins are forgiven." When the scribes were critically reasoning in their own hearts, "He blasphemeth: who can forgive sins but one, even God?" Jesus responded, "But that ye may know that the Son of man hath authority on earth to forgive sins (he saith to the sick of the palsy), I say unto thee, Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thy house." The visible miracle proved the invisible one. Similarly, the physical blessings that God has showered upon us are evidence of the invisible spiritual blessings he has in store for us.

It is interesting to know of the methods used in training our children here at the Hillsboro church. We begin their instruction in spiritual matters when they are two or sometimes three years of age. The teacher holds a picture before these very young children and asks, "What is it?" Someone responds, "It's a puppy." The teacher then asks, "Do you like puppies?" Then follows a discussion of puppies in which the children eagerly affirm that they like puppies. After a time the teacher asks, "Who made the puppy?" Then she says, "God did. Isn't God good?"

There follows another picture, this time of a cow. The teacher asks the children to identify the animal and then asks what it is that we receive from the cow. Some child suggests milk, and there follows a discussion of how good milk is. After a time the teacher asks again, "Who made the cow. God did. Isn't God good?" Through the years from these earliest experiences the children grow up to see the evidence of God's love in the bountiful blessings that he provides for us. Out of this, the child very naturally comes to the place that he wants to show God his love in return, which he does, as he gives himself to Christ and becomes a Christian.

Work To Be Done

Earlier in our study we read concerning the tragic people of Hong Kong. There are millions of people throughout the world for whom the necessities of life come hard. Many of them are deprived of adequate food and clothing and shelter. Why? Why should such be?

Obviously, with modern techniques and scientific know-how it is possible for the earth to produce enough food, clothing, shelter and the other necessities of life for all mankind. Why must some go hungry?

The answer lies in the greed, envy, jealousy, selfishness, nationalism, racism, and sinfulness of man. These qualities have prevented a proper distribution of God's bounty to all mankind. The Communists thought that government ownership was the answer to the poverty of mankind. However, it has been proved that government ownership does not remove greed, envy, jealousy, selfishness and the rest of man's sins.

Christ alone has the answer. It is the Good Samaritan. Only when the heart of man is tendered to the point that he unselfishly pauses to render help to his fellowman who is in need can the problems of the world's mal-distribution be solved. Only when man commits himself to the great principle. "Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you" (Matt. 7:12), can we hope to solve the problems of the downtrodden millions of the earth.

Conclusion

As we contemplate the bountiful blessings of God about us let us lift our eyes and see the giver of every good and perfect gift. Let us remember that his gifts are symbols of his love and that these physical gifts are an evidence Of even greater, invisible spiritual gifts yet to come. In appreciation of God's gifts to us, let us commit ourselves to his way of life and to the proclaiming of Christian principles to all men everywhere. In loving gratitude let us give ourselves to the Lord, then let us spend our lives in his service as we serve our fellowmen.