

THE WISE MAN--AND THE LAW

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 12, 1954 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

At the end of his great "sermon on the mount" Jesus said: "Every one therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not; for it was founded upon the rock. And everyone that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall thereof." (Matt. 7:24-27).

There are many people who seem to think that God arbitrarily put forth his commandments in order to provide as much discomfort to mankind as possible. According to this view God is a Simon Legree who desires to keep man from enjoying life. That conception is absolutely and completely wrong. A way back in the beginning of time God created this wonderful world for man, and then, in order that man might not ruin himself, he gave some rules designed to help man remain happy and prosperous and some day get to heaven.

Signs In the Valley

One of the most beautiful spots on earth is Yosemite National Park, out in the middle of the state of California. When we lived in California we spent a week or more there each summer, and one of the things that we liked to do most was go to the top of one of those great mountain precipices and look down at the valley below. Yosemite National Park lies largely in a deep gorge or valley, a few miles wide and a score or more miles long. Abrupt cliffs on either side of the valley tower above the valley floor some thirty-five hundred feet. I especially liked to go to one of those promontories, three-fifths of a mile above the valley floor, and look down. There below you is a miniature world, with its roads and buildings and people. The roads are stretched out below, like little ribbons of black. They wind around the redwoods and pines. Down there, you can't see very far, perhaps only a few yards, but from up here you can see the whole landscape.

Looking down from our mountain peak into the valley we could see where the roads go. Here is one that winds around until unexpectedly it opens on beautiful little Mirror Lake. Here is another which leads to breath-taking Yosemite Falls. Then, there is a road which leads around to the valley dump.

At the intersections of these roads there are appropriate signs to guide the tourist since they cannot "see" more than a few yards in any direction. One sign warns of "falling rock." Another calls attention to the fact that deer and bears may be crossing the road ahead. Still another warns of a dangerous intersection. The road to the dump where the refuse of all the camps is burned is marked: "Dead End-Park Dumping Ground." You would not know it if there were not a sign there, for this road looks just as inviting as the one which winds around to Mirror Lake. The park authorities, for the good of their guests, have placed many signs to warn and to guide.

I like to think that this is the way that God has put up the signs to guide us along the road of life. The commands in our Bible are for our good. We cannot see very far. We can see a little way, but we cannot see all the way. He, who can see everything from beginning to end, and who knows which roads lead to disaster and which roads lead to beautiful and happy living, has given some instructions to guide us. The man who lives the life of a Christian is a wise man, and the man who disregards the commandments of the Lord is a foolish man.

God's Laws of Nature

God has given man two kinds of laws. First, there are the laws of nature which are woven into the warp and woof of the universe. You do not find them written in any book, but they are God's laws none the less. We learn them by experience. Recently, our smaller boy conducted an experiment in regard to the law of gravity. He was standing on the bed, bouncing up and down, enjoying the springy effect, when he got too close to the edge, off he tumbled. That was probably lesson number nine hundred and sixty in his experimentation with the law of gravity. God's law of gravity is not to be taken lightly. As G. K. Chesterton said I "When a man jumps out of a third story window, he does not break the law of gravity. He only proves it." In a very real sense, man does not break God's laws; he only breaks himself.

What is true of the law of gravity is also true of the laws of health. It was interesting to me a few years ago to learn of a list of suggestions for healthful living made by the head physician at the Ford Hospital in Detroit, one of the largest hospitals in the nation. He listed a number of things which are good for health and then a number of things which are detrimental. The thing that interested me was that everything he recommended is something in keeping with the principles of Christianity, and everything that he condemned is something which the principles of Christianity would prevent. It is wonderful to know that 20th century doctors are telling people, "I you want to be healthy, then, live like a Christian." We do not break the laws of sleep, of diet, and of exercise with impunity. Man does not break God's laws; he only breaks himself.

There are also laws of the seasons. "While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." (Gen. 8:22). That has been true ever since the flood, and the farmer who goes out and disregards the seasons does so to his own hurt. Man does not break God's laws; he only breaks himself. There are the laws of nature, the unwritten laws which we learn by experience.

#### God's Written Laws

Many a man is willing to accept these laws, but when it comes to accepting God's laws in the Bible he says, "Oh, I don't think they are important." The same God who made the laws of nature made these other laws, and obedience to them is just as necessary to the laws we have been talking about.

Let us notice a few of God's written laws. Notice how our own experience and observation bears witness that they, too, are good. Among the ten basic commandments which make up the heart of the law of Moses is the command: "Honor thy father and thy mother." (Ex. 20:12). This is one of God's cardinal laws. It is not only a part of the law of Moses, it is a part of the law of Christ. When it is violated the children are not happy, the parents are not happy, and often there is tragedy ahead. Children who have some restrictions are the happiest children, present-day child psychologists tell us. They know what they can depend on. They have stability. The child who can get by with anything is a terror to the neighborhood. He is not happy and no one around him is happy. It is a basic principle of right that children are to obey their parents. God gave the command, not because he wanted to make children unhappy, but because he wanted them to lead full, happy lives.

#### Hatred Hurts the Hater

Another of the ten commandments is, "Thou shalt not kill." Christ broadened the scope of the commandment when he said, "Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not kill: and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment; but I say unto you, that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment ... Ye have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil: but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also ... Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you." (Matt. 5:21-22; 38-39; 43-44). As we grow older and become more mature in our thinking, we can see that the man who harbors hatred and wants to hurt somebody is really hurting himself. Hatred shrivels a man's heart. No man can go through life and be happy hating someone else because that feeling will blast the peace of mind that God intended for us to have. Do you want to be happy? Then when somebody does something hurtful to you, forgive him and forget it.

This is not only true of individuals; it is true of nations. A few years ago the Nazis built up a tremendous juggernaut of mechanized power and moved into Austria, and later into the low countries and France. They confidently declared, "We will conquer the world." But where are they now? How long has it been since you pronounced the name of Benito Mussolini or Adolph Hitler? Only twenty years ago they were just beginning their conquests. For ten years they have been dead. Jesus said, "Put up thy sword into its place, all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." (Matt. 26:52). While man is slow to learn it, this is just as true as the law of gravity. Every warlike nation (and individual) seals its own doom. May we someday learn that we do not break God's laws, we only break ourselves.

#### God's Law For Our Homes

Jesus also said, "Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, that everyone that looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery already with her in his heart." (Matt. 5:27-28). This is a commandment designed to secure respect for marriage. It is a commandment designed to protect the home. Does man break it with impunity? In our United States today one marriage out of four ends in divorce. When a home breaks up one of the marriage partners always suffers. Usually both suffer. When a home breaks up the children suffer. Society also suffers. You cannot build a strong society on broken homes. For the good of all concerned Jesus taught the sacredness of marriage ties.

Here is another of the Lord's commands: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal." (Matt. 6:19). Yet that is exactly what man is doing everywhere. He is centering his heart on material things, trying to get all he can, and keep it as long as he can. When he succeeds it does not bring happiness. Rather it brings problems. Preoccupation with money and with material things is a curse and not a blessing.

Later in that same chapter, Jesus said, "Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body what ye shall put on. Is not the life more, than the food, and the body more than the raiment?" (Matt. 6:25). Still later he added, "But seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." If you want to be happy, let the material things of this world be relatively unimportant. That is what Jesus meant when he said, "Martha, Martha, thou art troubled and cumbered about many things, but one thing is needful." (Luke 10:41-42). He was saying that even as necessary a thing as cooking dinner is relatively unimportant.

## Conclusion

The man is foolish who jumps out of the third story window. He does not break God's law of gravity; he only breaks himself. The same is true of the rest of God's laws. Man does not break them with impunity. If you are not a Christian, be wise and become one. You need to be a Christian now, because it is good to obey Christ's laws. They are right. They make for happiness. Neglecting them only brings suffering.

Above and beyond the arguments of this hour there stands an even greater reason why you should become a Christian. Some day you are going to stand before God at the judgment and he is going to say to those who are not his disciples, "Depart from me ye cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels ... These shall go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life." (Matt. 25:41, 46). You need to be a Christian because you don't want to be lost. This is not something fanciful, it is real.

There is a still higher reason why you need to be a Christian. God has loved you and blessed you, and you need to return that love. He loved you enough to give his only begotten Son that you might not perish but have everlasting life. The greatest reason of all for becoming a Christian is the need to return at least a part of the love that God has given you. Repent of your sins. Confess Jesus as your savior. Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. Live a faithful Christian life. We urge you to come to Christ now.