

“RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 26, 1954 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC.

I always welcome the beginning of a new year with enthusiasm. This feeling results partially from the natural zest we all have for living. We like to think that there is more of life to be lived and enjoyed. There is also at least something of an element of regret concerning the old year that is slipping away. There are many things that we wish we had done that we did not do. There are many things that we wish we could do differently. God gives us a new start once each year and it is always welcome.

As we wish for each one of you a happy new year in 1955, we remind you that happiness comes to the man that cooperates with God--the man who lives life God's way. To wish you a happy new year is just another way of saying "May your life be fully Christian in every way." That inevitably brings the deepest and most satisfying kind of happiness.

Facts We Need To Face

As we enter 1955 there are a few well known facts of which I would like to remind you. The first of these is the fact that there is more drinking being done now than ever before in the history of our nation. The liquor advertisements have so camouflaged the deadly effects of the product that they have gotten millions of people into the habit of drinking. There is more drinking being done, there is more liquor being consumed, and there are more people doing it than ever before. That is a hard, unpleasant fact.

Another fact similarly discouraging is the fact that more gambling is being done right now than ever before in the history of our country. There are more race tracks, they run more days during the year, and there are more people betting than ever before. It is staggering to know that as a nation we actually spend more on gambling than we do on both public and private education. It is likewise staggering to know that we spend more on liquor than we do on educating our young people. Those are hard facts concerning this world of which we are a part.

In addition, there is more profanity than ever before. Men used to be the only ones who swore, but now a great many women are experts at it. One can hardly go into a public situation and stay more than a few minutes without hearing God's name taken in vain. There seems to be an increase even in that.

In addition, they tell us that there is now an increase in criminal activity. There are longer dockets in the various courts than ever before. There are more crimes being committed than five years ago or ten years ago.

Still again there are more young people involved in what we call juvenile delinquency than ever before. We have seen a great deal on this subject recently in our area.

There are now more American people who are divorced than ever before. One marriage in every four breaks up, and the increase through the years is alarming. I could go on and mention many other concrete evidences of national ill health, but these are enough to set before you something of the nature of the world in which we live. These are not imaginary things. They are common, everyday, well-known facts.

A Strange Paradox

Along with these there is a paradoxical additional fact of great importance. There are more church members today than ever before. More people go to church than ever in the history of our nation. I can remember a few years ago when less than 50% of the American people were members of any church. I am glad to say that it is now above 50% by several percentage points, and each percentage point means well over a million and a half people. That means that over 80,000,000 Americans are affiliated with some religious body. It means more thinking and talking about religion.

I remember a few years ago attending, as a visitor, a special convocation at the University of California at Los Angeles. Something new had been added. They had invited in a preacher and he had delivered a series of lectures of a religious nature in that large secular state-operated school. During these intervening years that has become standard practice so that nearly every state college or university now has what they call Religious Emphasis Week. These would have been unheard of twenty years ago, but a secular institution having a minister come in to speak is common now.

I did not dream that there would come a day when the taxi cabs would be carrying signs telling people to go to church or to go out to a revival. I did not think that the big billboards would be urging the same messages, but those things have come. I did not expect that prominent people such as the Governor, the Mayor, a prominent business man, and even military men would take the action that they took several months ago in the Billy Graham revival. There is a great deal more activity on the religious front than ever before. How

then do you square that religious activity with the facts that we drink more, that we commit more crimes, that we have more divorces and all the rest?

### What's The Answer?

It may be that more people are rationalizing and salving their consciences. Having drunk and gambled during the week they feel the necessity of having something to do with God on Sunday. Several months ago I heard Chancellor Harvey Branscomb, of Vanderbilt University, wrestle with this same problem. Why are there so many religious people, yet we see an increase in the various kinds of sinful activity? He was trying to answer the question, "Is there really a movement, a groundswell, back toward religion?" After he had presented the pros and cons, after he had referred to the religious revival on his own campus which had brought more people into one assembly than ever before in the history of the state of Tennessee, his conclusion was that while there are many signs pointing toward re-emphasis on religion, they are more or less on the surface. He failed to find a really convincing body of evidence that the American people are coming closer to God.

### A Materialistic World

When I look at our world and really stop to analyze what I see, I am impressed with its materialistic nature. Its primary emphasis is on the satisfying of man's physical senses. Sense gratification seems to be its god. Leaf through any of the magazines. What do they say? They are primarily concerned about telling us about prettier homes, more luxurious cars, and better looking and better tasting foods. They show us how to sleep more comfortably. They display beautiful and rich clothing. They tell us of the myriad creature-comforts which are ours to enjoy. The whole emphasis is upon pleasure. This materialism of our world has grown on us so gradually that I feel that we are largely unaware of it. We have clamored for more gadgets to do our work, for prettier surroundings, and for more creature-comforts of every kind, we have tightened our ties to the earth. We have become earthbound. There is less of the spiritual. Less time and concern are given to it. When man had fewer comforts and fewer machines to work for him he had more time in which to look at the stars at night and meditate about that which is eternal.

Here at the beginning of a new year it seems to me particularly appropriate to remind you of our continuing battle not to let the earth reach out and engulf us. Only the spiritual will last.

Just one life,  
'twil soon be past,  
Only what's done  
For Christ  
Will last.

### Permanence

Compare your life to one of the buildings built at a National Exposition. I have heard my father tell about Centennial Park back in the days when he was a young man in school. Somewhere around the turn of the century in what we call Centennial Park there were many buildings. They were the latest in design and were beautiful to look at. They were erected for our state Centennial. One of those buildings still stands--the Parthenon, one of the most photogenic buildings in the world. Originally it, too, was built of temporary plaster like the others. They were thrown up for a summer and not to be used after the exposition. The Parthenon was so beautiful, however, that the citizens of the state decided to make it permanent. They replaced it with the present permanent structure. What about those other buildings which stood about it? Where are they? Almost before they were built they were torn down.

Perhaps you went out to San Francisco or up to New York in 1939 to see the grand spectacle of a World Fair. Remember how you were awed by the size and the beauty of those buildings? Where are they now? Why they are forgotten except in pictures. They were built only for a day. Like the toadstool that comes up on your lawn, it appears almost overnight, and is gone as quickly. Compare these figures with your life and with the lives of others. I am afraid that in this land we are building our lives largely as men build buildings for expositions, and that when the summer is gone there will be nothing left but a vacant place. Let us build our lives like the ancient pyramids. What a difference in man's lives. Some men build for eternity while others build only for the moment.

When we let our modern world with its magnificent physical accomplishments "the all and the end all of life," we become slaves to things. It is bad enough to be enslaved by an enemy nation. It is worse to become slaves to the products of our own hands. Turn through the magazine again, think about radio and television advertising, and then think about the neon signs that dominate our streets. When you look at our civilization it is, as Elton Trueblood has said it, "a cut-flower civilization." You know what happens to a flower when it is cut. It looks beautiful for a little while, then fades away. As long as there are roots going deep there is a future. Our deep roots are spiritual. When we cut loose from God we begin to die.

### The Solid Ground

We are here on earth for a purpose and nothing in the world must be allowed to jeopardize or defeat that purpose. I hold in my hand a Bible. It stands for everything that we are trying to say. Think of the Bible. Think of the church. Think of Christ. As the new year begins let's let them dominate our thinking rather than the material things which are so soon to be gone. I remember a magnificent statement of power in God's word: "The grass withereth, the flower thereof fadeth, but the word of our God endureth forever." (Isaiah 40:8). We could ponder that for a lifetime. There is nothing transient, nothing weak, nothing just for the moment. It is solid and we can depend on it.

. In the book of Proverbs there are two sentences: "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man but the ends thereof are the ways of death." (Proverbs 14:34,12). From the book of James we read a passage especially appropriate for the new year: "Come now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into this city, and spend a year there and trade, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. What is your life? For ye are a vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, "If the Lord will, we shall both live, and do this or that." (James 4:13-15).

### Conclusion

As we enter the new year let us remember that we are not here for long. What kind of buildings are we going to build--a pyramid that will last for centuries, or an exposition building that will be gone and forgotten before the year is out? What we are saying has to do with the direction of our lives. Are we living for the body or are we living for the soul?

As we face the new year let us resolve to spend more time on the things that are eternal, the things that are spiritual; and to spend less concern and less time on the things that are only for the moment. God gave us a wonderful world in which to live but we have almost decided that it is heaven. What a sad bargain it is when a man sells the real heaven for the pleasures of this world.. Lift up your eyes and see the world to come, think of what it will mean, and then use this present world in its legitimate place.

Let me remind you of Joshua in the long ago, standing before the great host of God's people and saying: "Now therefore fear Jehovah, and serve him in sincerity and in truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the river, and in Egypt; and serve ye Jehovah. And if it seem evil unto you to serve Jehovah, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah." (Joshua 24:14-15). Let those words from the ancient setting apply to our world--good in many ways, but earthbound. Lift up your eyes to God and his way, the only way.