



"THE TABLE AND THE BROTHER"

**A Sermon by
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**Broadway Baptist Church
Fort Worth, Texas**

Vol. XI

February 6, 1972

No. 19

Scripture Reference: I John 4:7-11

At a very practical, down-to-earth level, one of the most important things we human beings do hour-by-hour is to determine the value of the various realities we encounter. On this one process almost everything turns; how we spend our time, how we spend our money, yea, the very shape we give to our whole lives. The evaluative process is a crucial one. And as I ponder its importance, I also realize just how unqualified many of us are to make the right judgments. It is incredible how insensitive and unknowing we can be about certain realities. Jesus' image of the pearls before swine is an apt one at times. History is filled with momentous mistakes which have grown out of a lack of perception on mankind's part.

This fact was brought home to me quite vividly back in 1955 when my wife and I were in Milan, Italy, and went to see Leonardo de Vinci's famous portrayal of the Last Supper. It had originally been painted on the wall of a monks' dining room, and

right in the lower middle of the picture a doorway had been cut through. Our guide explained that some years after it had been painted, the generation of priests who lived there did not recognize any special value in it, and had deemed direct access to the kitchen more important than a few colors on the wall. Therefore, to this day, the remains of a doorway mar the original of one of the world's great masterpieces, and this is a symbol, I think, of how oblivious human beings can be the true value of the realities they encounter.

I have to be careful here, however, and not get too self-righteous or judgmental, for this is not just a problem other people have. This is a problem I face day in and day out as I attempt "to size things up" and determine what value they are going to have for my existence. I can be just as "out of it" as those priests in Italy. I am infinitely capable of being like "a pig before a pearl" and not have the slightest inkling of the value I am encountering.

At a very superficial level this happened to me not long ago. I was browsing one evening in a new jewelry store that had just opened in Louisville. In the back of my mind was the realization that my wife's watch was on the blink, and I decided to check out the possibility of a new one. Understand, now, I am not knowledgeable at all in this field, and so with a vague "Timex frame of reference," I sauntered up to the counter, told of my desires for my wife, and pointed to a tray of watches that appealed to my fancy. The salesman said: "O yes, these are blank blank" — some trade name I had never heard — "She would like these." After examining them for a moment, I asked the crucial question: "How much is this one?" Quite matter-of-factly he said: "Seven hundred and fifty dollars!" No amount of play acting could have disguised my astonishment, for I had something like "thirty-nine ninety-five" on my mind. I must have telegraphed this fact, for in that awkward moment of silence which followed the clerk said coolly: "This is not exactly what you were looking for?" And I answered in relief: "Right! I don't think this is quite the thing for her." As quickly as possible, I got out of there!

This is only one of a number of experiences I have had where my impression and the real value of a thing were miles apart. And in the case of the jewelry store, I could claim this was out of my field; after all, I am a minister and therefore should not be expected to have expertise in such an area. And yet, you know,

even that does not get me off the hook, for in the midst of my own discipline — in the area where I ought to know the most — I still have trouble with my evaluating mechanism. I am capable of being as blind to the real value of persons as I was to those watches.

In a much more serious experience, I came face-to-face with this fact some time ago on a retreat in which I participated. We decided to end our experience together with a simple observance of the Lord's Supper. We were a small enough group to sit in a circle and pass the elements to each other. After the prayer of thanksgiving, I turned to the person next to me and handed him the loaf and said: "John, this is the body of Christ which was broken for you." He took it, broke off a piece, ate it, and then called the next person's name and did the same thing. Later we blessed the cup and passed it around in the same way, saying: "This is the blood of Christ poured out for you." As I sat there that afternoon and watched the loaf and the cup make their way around the circle and listened to those words, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the thought: "This is how much God values each one of these individuals. He cared enough about them to send His son Jesus and let Him go through what He had to suffer for them." And to be honest with you, this came as an astonishing thought. In fact, the surprise I had felt in that jewelry store was nothing to compare with what I felt in that moment, for you see, this evaluation was jarringly different from the one I had been feeling for some of these people. This particular retreat had become a very intense experience. We had gotten below the level of those conventional rituals by which we usually relate, and many feelings had been expressed. I had been hurt by some of the things that had been said. I had also grown disgusted with certain others who seemed to me to be unattractive dullards. At that moment I was in no mood to regard each one of those individuals as important enough to God to merit the sacrifice of Christ, but there it was — like the price tag on a watch — the bread and cup symbolizing the way God felt about these persons and the evaluation He put on them.

I have never completely gotten over that experience; in fact, to this day, every time I participate at the Table, it comes back to mind and I am astonished all over again. And I wonder, are you really any different? Look about you for a moment. Here are all different kinds of people, some you know, some you do not know, some who appeal to you, some who

repulse you or fascinate you, and some who make no impression whatsoever on you. And in a moment the bread and the cup are going to be passed to every one of us with the implication: God cared enough for that person to send this Son Jesus to suffer and die on a cross. And I ask you: is this not an incredible thought? When I am honest about how I regard some people, and then set that evaluation alongside the way God feels about that same one, I am overwhelmed at the difference here, and realize how far I am still from seeing things the way God sees them.

This value judgment of God — which makes every man worth the suffering of Christ — has always been part of the radical scandal of the Christian faith. No assertion is more “unnatural” to us, or, cuts more drastically across our normal reactions. There is much within us that rebels against such a vision of things. We prefer our more conventional categories of class and appearance and respectability and race; in short, all of the criteria by which we usually evaluate another and decide how much he is worth to us. God’s way of looking at people knocks all these categories “into a cocked hat,” and this is not easy to accept. To look behind the way a man appears to us to the way he appears to God calls for something about as radical as being born all over again, or starting to do life on an entirely different set of assumptions, and it is only fair to tell you this as you approach the experience of the Table. There is social dynamite here, a declaration of cost and worth that staggers the imagination and confounds our habitual ways of evaluating. It sets before us vividly the mighty cost of Jesus’ suffering, and then says: “Every man alive is valuable enough to God to justify this.” The message of the Table is the message of our text of this morning from I John: “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because God sent His only Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we love God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be an expiation for our sins.” (4:9-10) Astonishing as it is, here is the way the Maker evaluates the work of His hands which is every man.

But the Table does more than contrast our value judgments about people with God’s. It calls us to act on this astonishment; that is, to make it the basis not of our seeing but of our doing. When the clerk in that store said seven hundred and fifty dollars, I was called on to respond, not to the value I had mistakenly constructed, but to the value as it was set by the watchmaker. And the Table challenges us in the same

way. In the words of our text: "If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another". You see, an ethical task grows out of this idealistic vision. If other people are what God values them to be, then not only the way I regard them but the way I relate to them will be affected. This is the practical challenge that grows out of an experience at the Table, and nothing could be more crucial as far as the future of this world is concerned.

Archbishop Temple once observed that wars always break out when worship breaks down. I must admit I was annoyed the first time I read that, for I thought it was attributing too much power to the act of worship. And yet, on reflection, I have come to agree with it, for the truth is, all of our humanitarian instincts are rooted ultimately in the religious sphere, and when we lose touch with that way of evaluating, it is not long until brutalizing inhumanity takes over. In our Western civilization we are so accustomed to hearing principles like "the value of the individual" and "the preeminence of personality" that we may forget these value-judgments come straight out of the Judaic-Christian vision of God. Lose touch with that; namely, with God's incredible evaluation of each man, and you gradually will lose your humanitarian vision and will have trouble substantiating why some men have any value at all. War does break out when worship breaks down, which means that what stands before us now is not an empty or irrelevant ritual. The very process of our becoming human and remaining so and having a future is bound up with this incredible assertion: every person here, yea, every person alive, is important enough in God's eyes for Jesus to have come and gone through what He had to go through.

I have already admitted that such a thought was and still is overwhelmingly astonishing to me, but with all my heart, I believe this is true. This is the way God values you and me and every one who has ever lived. What an assertion! What a challenge!

"In this love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sin. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another."

Well?