



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"LOOKING RIGHT AND LEFT"

Sunday Morning, June 3, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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A teacher of mine once defined heresy in this way: it is truth in an unbalanced form. He reminded us that God's magnificent revelation can never be reduced to one simple statement. The Bible contains not one truth but hundreds of truths. Therefore, its correct interpretation becomes a matter of proper relationships. One cannot "rightly divide the word of truth" by reading some verses here and there. Each part must be related to the whole. What is said at this point must be compared with what is said everywhere else. Only in this way can all the facets be fit together into a living whole. It is failure at precisely this point that has resulted in the great heresies of the past. Men have taken one aspect of a matter to the neglect of all else and thus produced distortion. When a photographer stands too close to one object in a scene, the whole picture is thrown out of focus, and this is what has happened over and over again in the history of the Church.

I could illustrate this assertion in virtually any area of Christian thought, but I want to go straight to the point of my concern this morning. It has to do with the great debate that is going on today in the political and economic realm. To varying degrees we are all involved in the voluminous crossfire between right-wing and left-wing groups. The conflict of opinion was never more heated than it is at this moment. Many voices clamor for our attention and support - the N.A.M., the John Birch Society, the A.D.A., the A.M.A., and on and on you could go. At times one grows bewildered and confused. It is like being lost on "the cloverleaf" of a busy expressway - things are coming at you from all directions and you do not know which way to turn. This is how many of us find ourselves, and some have come to me and asked: "Is Christianity of any help in all this? Is there some direction in the Faith that can guide us amid all this controversy?" I am happy to answer in the affirmative, for there is such guidance. After all, when you analyze these conflicting positions, they are basic attitudes toward life - toward one's self, his fellow man, and God. And needless to say, this is the natural habitat of Biblical truth. As we stand, then, looking right and left, what does Christianity say?

I have found a particularly helpful word on this subject in the last chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Here are two imperatives that go right to the heart of the matter. The first is this: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Three verses later Paul follows by saying: "For every man shall bear his own burden" (Galatians 6:5). Now on the surface it appears that Paul is talking in circles. He demands a corporate concern, going beyond one's self, yet he turns right around and advocates a kind of rugged individualism. Is this irrational double talk? No, I think if you will examine the issue more closely, you will find that these imperatives are not contradictory. Rather, they complement and correct each other. They are, so to speak, the two sides of a coin or the twin foci of an eclipse. The truth lies in their interrelationship. Here is the importance of "the balance" I mentioned earlier. If you take either one of these imperatives and exalt it at the expense of the other, you end up with distortion. The whole thing is thrown out of focus the minute you emphasize one and neglect the other. Only as they are held together in living tension is the truth maintained.

But I believe this is exactly what has not been done. Groups have taken one principle or the other and made absolutes out of them. So today we have distortions on both extremes. Of course, I cannot go into great detail, but it is my contention that both right and left can be described as overemphases of one of these two imperatives. Let us look at the matter a little more closely.

What happens when all the emphasis is placed on the first imperative; when "bearing one another's burdens" overshadows individual responsibility? Concern tends to become a corporate thing, and a process of depersonalization sets in. This has been illustrated clearly in many of the welfare programs of the last three decades. With great idealism, the liberals tackled many old problems in the early thirties. Slum housing was replaced, the aged were cared for, and provision was made for the unemployed. But in the concentration on the outward problems, the inward side of life was neglected. No creative response was called forth from many individuals. Rather, they came to expect others to take care of them. It was not a matter of the strong helping the weak to their feet. In many cases the weak laid down and gave up altogether. Because they were not challenged to help themselves, they gradually degenerated into parasites on society. And today there is a great host who have lost all personal initiative and assume no responsibility for what they are or for the consequences of their deeds.

A good analogy for this situation is given by Dr. Pearly Ayers of Berea College, a man whose whole life has been dedicated to the problems of the mountain people. He tells of what has happened to the grizzly bear. It used to be the proudest animal of the forest, but since the coming of tourists, it has been reduced to a dependent pawn, waiting for someone to throw it some food. And the same thing has happened to the once self-reliant mountaineer and many others who have been inundated by this distorted approach. This is certainly not what the liberals intended, but who can deny that it is the factual result? It all stems from pulling one aspect out of balance with the other. When all the attention is given to the burden and none to the burden bearer, no real solution is reached. You merely rearrange the factors and create new problems. A century ago society corrected the evil of child labor. But what do we have today? Juvenile delinquency. Because the individuals were not developed along with the outward changes, little real progress has been achieved.

We should have learned by now that corporate concern by itself is not enough. Painting the pump handle does not change the water in the well, and by the same token, there is more to be done than altering the externals. Here is a case of good intentions but ineffective methods. To concentrate solely on "bearing one another's burdens" without saying also: "let every man bear his own burden" is distortion.

But if individual concern should not be neglected, neither should it be exclusively exalted. The opposite extreme is as much a distortion as that which we have been considering. The picture can be blurred from the right as well as the left. Therefore, we must go on to consider what happens when sole emphasis is placed on "every man bearing his own burden."

There has always been a strong tendency for man "to go it alone." From the time of Cain right down to the present, the question is asked: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 3:9). The philosophies of "live and let live," and "every man for himself," have always commended themselves, especially to the strong and aggressive. There are many who think "laissez-faire" is more than an economic term; it is an acceptable way of life: "Let every man assume a 'hands off' policy toward all others. Let each one go his own way and paddle his own canoe."

This type of radical individualism is increasing today, but it is as unrealistic as it is unchristian. Life today is too complex and involved for any man to expect complete freedom. Back in the days of a few cars, it did not make much difference how you drove. But, today, on a super highway, such uninhibited freedom is impossible. And so it is with every area of modern life. Increased population means increased restriction on pure voluntarism. To claim exemption from a responsibility to others in society is to blindly ignore the realities of the twentieth century.

And such individualism also denies the essence of Christianity. To become a Christian is to begin to love God and your neighbor, and this entails becoming involved with others. What happens to another who is made in the image of God becomes a great concern. In Christ, men cease to be islands unto themselves and become brothers to each other. The grand "Law of a Christian" is one's sensitivity to those who are hungry and naked and thirsty and in need. The Lord's Prayer is a fine summary of Christian teaching, and it is permeated with the corporate concern. Everything is "our" and not "mine"; the singular personal pronouns are nowhere to be found. Someone has said that Christ's whole purpose was to change our preoccupation from "I" to "we." You see, the whole of Christianity is at war with a radical individualism. There is no place in it for one who wants to do as he pleases and chart his own course. It is pre-eminently a way of costly involvement with others. This is what the rich young ruler could not accept. He wanted a religion that would satisfy but not demand. He had observed all the individual prohibitions from his youth up, but when asked to share his wealth with the poor, he balked.

We must keep this in clear focus amid all the talk today about individual freedom. Too often this is the defense for an unfair privilege or calloused unconcern. The question must always be asked: "Freedom for what? Do you want liberty simply to satisfy your own selfishness, or is it liberty to love your neighbor as yourself?" If those on the left have gone too far with corporate concern, those on the right have gone too far with personal concern.

This brings us back to my original contention: the extremes of both sides are distortions of Paul's two-fold principle. In delicate balance it stands above both in judgment. If I have appeared to speak on both sides this morning, it is because I believe the Gospel is a higher point of reference. You cannot equate the revelation of God with any human construction or opinion. No matter how the Faith may be twisted for selfish purposes, it is a judgment over all.

Therefore, let us hold together in living tension these words of Paul. We must not take an "either-or" approach to something that is "both-and." The truth is in holding these two as a unit. Like the old proverb about the bundle of sticks, when taken separately, are easily broken. But together they assume unbreakable strength. We must say at the same time: "Bear ye one another's burdens" and "every man shall bear his own burden."

This is the law of Christ. May it illumine your way as, looking right and left, you seek to follow Him!