

CHRIST'S STANDARD OF VALUES

"Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought 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 meat, and the body than raiment?" Matthew 6:25.

There is only one answer to that question. The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment. This, then, states Christ's standard of values. Things are made for men, not men for things; and success is to be measured by the development of character, and not by the accumulation of wealth.

Although this seems a self-evident proposition, it is practically denied, and has been from the foundation of the world. The old political economy, if it does not actually deny, at all events entirely ignores it. Political economy is the science of accumulating and distributing wealth. It concerns itself simply with wealth. It has nothing to do with the effect on men of the process of accumulating or distributing that wealth. Political economy concerns mankind as occupied solely in acquiring and consuming wealth. Its standard of values is wholly material. It has nothing to do with the effect on individual men, that is, whether it makes them better, wiser, happier, truer, nobler.

On the assumption of political economy, that man is solely occupied in accumulating wealth, mercantile standards are based. Of course here in this service, your measurements of life will be somewhat different, but tomorrow they will largely be mercantile measurements. The successful man is the man who makes wealth. The man who loses wealth fails. What is this but to say that the standards of life are material standards? The tests of greatness are material tests.

But, Christ says that is not the test. The test is character. The question is What sort of men are you making? While the political economists are saying get money, Christ says, No, seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Character comes first. Man first, wealth afterward, says Christ. Man is the standard of value says Christ.

All things in life are to be measured by this standard. The life is more than meat. The body is more than raiment. By this you are to measure religion and religious institutions. That community is the most religious which has the best men.

One of the most exciting events of World War II was the rescue of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker and his party from the vast spaces of the Pacific Ocean. He had been sent on a military mission when his plane ran out of gas and was forced down. For 22 days and 21 nights he drifted in a tiny rubberboat, tortured by hunger and thirst and tormented by the ever-present possibility of death. It is an enlightening fact that men in such crises invariably turn to God, and that prayer which under ordinary circumstances might seem unreal comes to be regarded as both natural and inevitable. We are not concerned now with an evaluation of the religious experience of these men adrift on the Pacific; I am merely mentioning it. Captain Rickenbacker tells us that he and his men "frankly and humbly prayed for deliverance." They believe that their deliverance was due to answered prayer.

Something, however, occurred before the plane was forced down which is as revealing as the experience that followed the forced landing. "We then started to pound out the S.O.S. Our radio operator did that for one solid hour. In the meantime we dropped everything in the way of mail, tools, baggage, and equipment that was loose in the ship, and if you ever think that material things are worth anything, have that experience and you will find out how useless they are, no matter how you may have cherished them." You see, the crisis not only made God more real to them; it also changed their scale of values. The things that had seemed very valuable they now gladly threw overboard in order to safeguard that which was more valuable -- their lives. This picture of men discarding material things in order to safeguard life illustrates one of Jesus' basic insights. Text. Life to Him was always "more than." Put life first! If necessary,

throw overboard everything that endangers it. That is the message of Jesus. Observe some things Jesus said life was "more than."

1. Things.

A rich young man came to Him once seeking life. It appears that instead of owning his possessions, his possessions owned him. Consequently, Jesus advised him to part with his possessions if he would enter into life. Indeed, Jesus went so far as to ask, "For what doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Of course, we must not think that Jesus under-estimated the importance of material things. He fed the hungry. He has taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." But He insisted that "Man shall not live by bread alone;" that material things should be our servants, not our masters.

One fears that we are far from accepting this viewpoint of Jesus. With many the only measure of a man is the dollar sign. The scale of values upon which our civilization is built indicates that, more often than not, we do make material values the measures of life. We often subordinate human life to gain. We often put profits before personality. We often evaluate personality itself by the dollar sign, as we ask about a man, "How much is he worth?" Jesus would never do that. He never would admit that men were as cheap as that. To Him life was more than material things. He taught that "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

To illustrate: No house can get along without a kitchen. There is more to a house, however, than that. There are in it books to improve our minds; a living room, which becomes increasingly livable as we put something beautiful into it. There are also bedrooms where we rest and are refreshed. The very house in which a man lives, therefore, indicates that he has needs other than the material. The mind hungers for truth and the spirit for beauty, as does the body for food.

Yet, is it not true to say that, figuratively speaking, many of us make the kitchen the be-all and end-all of life? In our ceaseless preoccupation with things we neglect our minds and our souls. Many of us, for example, deny ourselves the high privilege of worship. We have no time, we say. Imagine! No time for orienting our souls to God, our Creator, or for contemplating eternal values. The business of making a living obscures the privilege of living a life. Our business or our pleasure completely monopolizes our waking hours. Hear Jesus ask, "Is not the life more than meat?"

Let us hope that the crisis through which we are passing will help correct our scale of values. How cheap are possessions in comparison with life. Let us realize that the life is more than meat.

2. Unbridled desire.

Life to Jesus was not only more than things; it was more than desire. Quite frequently He insisted that desires should be made subservient to life. Like things, they are to be our servants, not our masters. He said in substance that the way of easy-going self-indulgence destroys life and inevitably leads to disillusionment and disgust.

This is the theme of one of His greatest parables, the parable of the lost son. The prodigal unquestionably went off looking for life, but he found death instead because he took the road of unbridled desire. Jesus taught that life must be won through sacrifice -- sometimes the sacrifice of that which is very dear to us.

Christ carried this emphasis of the primacy of life into the realm of society itself. He would have said that even the institutions of society must be made subordinate to life. The greatest and most powerful of His day was the Temple. It was the symbol not only of the religious, but also of the political life of His people. To destroy the Temple was almost synonymous with the destruction of the nation. Jesus loved the Temple. He grew up under its influence. And yet, whenever there was a conflict between the claims of the institution and the needs of human life, He put life first.

To preserve life was more important than to preserve the Temple. And so He broke the law of the Temple. He plucked the ears of corn on the sabbath day, and when the Pharisees took Him to task for it, He said to them: "What man shall there be among you that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep?" It is as if He had said: "I believe in the Temple. It is the most valuable institution we possess. But even the Temple is not an end in itself. It was made, like the sabbath, for man."

Indeed, as one contemplates the conflicts between our Master and the Pharisees it becomes evident that they center around the question of the value of life, the worth of persons. Jesus was more humane than the Pharisees. Whether He was plucking the ears of corn, or healing the man with the withered hand, or eating and drinking with publicans and sinners, the issue was the same. In each case the conflict was between the needs of life and the observance of the law. And in each case He put the law of love above the law of the Temple, the needs of human life above the institution. Always to Jesus life was first.

Isn't there a lesson here for us? The church that will never die will be the church that puts itself at the service of the area in which it is located, and makes itself the servant of man. Our most valuable possession is our church in the service of life. For what is the church at its best but men and women banded together with the spirit of Christ in their hearts, seeking to be the avenues, to their fellow men, of God's redemptive grace.

"Is not the life more than meat?" The gospel of Christ assures us that it is. Life is more valuable than things. Things must be our servants, not our masters. We must possess them. They must not possess us. Life is more valuable than desire. The broad road of self-indulgence leads to death; the narrow way of discipline to life. Life is more valuable than any institution, whether that institution be the Temple, the church, the state or any other. These are not ends in themselves. Our primary concern must not be for the growth of institutions but of men. The value of institutions does not lie in themselves. Even the church is a means to an end. That end is the redemption of life. In the Kingdom of God greatness and power are made subservient to the needs of life. Not overlordship but service is the rule.

To live in the light of the Kingdom is to discover a new scale of values. The values which are regnant in the world are not those of the Kingdom of God. The proof of this is that in our world, life does not come first. We constantly sacrifice human life upon the altars of unworthy ambition, greed, pride, prejudice, or lust. We glory in our skylines with their towering buildings, in our streamlined this or airconditioned that; yet often within the very shadow of our material greatness and power are human beings who live in areas of incredible neglect, where life, instead of realizing its divine possibilities, deteriorates physically and spiritually.

The more the leaven of the gospel works, the more difficult it will be for us to tolerate complacently the evils that blight or destroy human personality. In any society where God's will is done on earth, life will come first -- the life that is "more than meat."