

"THE THINGS THAT ARE OURS"

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday of this past week, I attended a clergy meeting in one of the other churches here in this neighborhood. And after the meeting was over, I stepped into the sanctuary to see what it was like. I had never been in this particular church before. I happened to notice some bulletins from the previous Sunday in one of the back pews. I picked one up and quickly read it through. In so doing I came across this rather curt note at the bottom of page two: "NOT EVERYBODY IN THIS CHURCH HAS BEEN CONVERTED SO PLEASE WATCH YOUR HANDBAGS AND WALLETS". I thought that this might be an appropriate warning to all of you who have gathered here on this our Dedication Sunday....not that there are any thieves about, but because I want to talk to you - openly, honestly and directly - about your wallets and your handbags and what you have in them. We find it necessary to do this on occasion, although I think that this is only the third time in seven years that I have preached a sermon on this subject. We hope that those of you who are visitors to the church today will translate what is said into terms of your own church loyalties. the words of Martin Luther:

We call to mind ~~some things which are ours and some things which are not ours~~: "EVERY MAN NEEDS TWO CONVERSIONS: THE FIRST OF HIS HEART, AND THE SECOND OF HIS POCKETBOOK".

DEVELOPMENT

Jesus once said: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's". His words point up to us the fact that He took a very practical view of so called mundane matters of money and citizenship. Our Lord, mind you, was no ivory tower theorist. He knew that we all have certain earthly responsibilities and he was not opposed to such requirements, but he always sought to remind men that they had obligations and responsibilities toward God. ~~And men sometimes forget this in their pursuit of the things of life.~~ Along with the claims of the family, the claims of the state, and the claims of the world, there are also the claims of God. And when we recognize the things of God, we are then better able to determine the place and the use of the things that are Caesar's and the things we call our own. In the time we have together this morning, I want to consider with you several guiding principles to shape and mold our attitudes on these matters.

THE THINGS THAT ARE OURS BELONG TO GOD

To begin with, we need to recognize the fact that the things that are ours belong to God. God has made all things. He is the source of all things. He owns all things. You and I enjoy the things that are ours as stewards of the bounty of the creative and eternal God. This is basic, fundamental, but often forgotten by modern man.

As the collection plates are handed to the ushers in many a church, you will here the minister repeat the phrase: ALL THINGS COME OF THEE, O LORD, AND OF THINE OWN DO WE GIVE UNTO THEE. But like so many words, so many words in our ritual, the repetition of them often takes away their force and impact. We should pause to let those words sink in. The tourist in London should stop to ponder the words that are chiseled in the stones of the Bank of England. "THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF". It's so easy to preen ourselves on the achievements

of man, forgetting that back of all those great achievements are the life giving power of the sun, the bounties of the good earth in soil, mine and sea, and the electrifying and wave bearing wonders of the air.

And as for man himself, whence comes the power of mind and body to use the gifts of the good earth. Consider, if you will, one of the most self-created acts that we can imagine - that of a singer singing his own composition. The theme is his own; the voice is his own. But who gave him that mind to create, that heart to feel, that voice to use? Parents and teachers were involved in the preparation and the cultivation of those talents. However, back of these is the artistic gift which comes from the creator of all life. God-given talent is the phrase we so often use...

The things which are ours belong then to god. In attempting to get a proper perspective toward money, we need to reflect upon the source of that which is ours. God can not be left out of the picture. No clever rationalizing can avoid this fundamental fact. You may wonder why we stress this truth that life is a trust for which we should be thankful? I suppose it's because there are so many people who are apt to think that the world owes them a living; because there are so many thoughtless people who never give any concern to the source of their blessings; because there are so many smugly successful people who think that they are paying their full way; because there are so many disgruntled people who grouse over the fact that they are not getting their money's worth. To be sure, at some points, we may not be getting our money's worth. To be sure, some of the income tax paid this year will undoubtedly be wasted in governmental laxity and red tape. But all things considered.....in the grand total, most of us are getting far more than what we pay for.

The things which are ours belong to God. And without the proper recognition of this fact, our eager possessiveness can lead to a barren and empty life. But when we choose on the other hand, to live our lives according to this truth, then our labors and the ownership of the things that are ours takes on a new meaning. It completely changes the picture. No longer is it a question of how much we give, but rather of how much we dare to withhold. Real Christian stewardship begins with this principle.

THE THINGS WHICH ARE
OURS SHAPE OUR LIVES

Another thing we need to remember is that the things which are ours help to shape and mold our lives and the values by which we live.

There is an interesting little play by James Barrie entitled, "The Will" that helps to illustrate this point. The story opens with a young couple sitting in the office of a lawyer drawing up a will. They are newly weds and are extremely happy. They are also idealistic and unselfish as they plan for the future. The husband's name is Philip Ross. He has a sum of money which has been left to him by one of his relatives. Being very much in love, Philip Ross wants to make his will only one sentence long and leave everything to his wife. She, however, feels their funds should be shared with his cousins and with a convalescent home in which they have been interested. Philip agrees and this is done. The lawyer likes their attitude toward the things which are theirs and says, "You're a ridiculous couple, but don't change".

Twenty years go by. Philip Ross and his wife return one day to the lawyer's office to make out a new will. By now there is a considerable estate for Philip has been quite successful, and he has made quite a bit of money. Mrs. Ross goes along with him to the lawyer's office because she wants to see to it that he doesn't do anything foolish in terms of making out the will. He now wants to include some of his cousins; however, she objects to this. They wrangle bitterly about how their money should be disposed of. The convalescent home is left out altogether this time; nothing takes its place. Both Philip and his wife refer to the money as "my money". Only after much argument can they reach an agreement.

The years pass; changes come. When another twenty years have gone, Philip Ross, (now Sir Philip Ross) and now 65 comes back to the lawyer's office. His wife is dead. He tells the lawyer that all of his children have turned out to be great disappointments - in his own words, "rotters". This time he leaves nothing to his relatives. He wants to make further revisions in the will. He feels that his own children should not be included...he does not want to give his money away to any good cause. He starts to dictate his will will to his lawyer: "I leave it....I leave it....I leave my money to...my, God, I don't know what to do with it!" And he gets up and nervously paces back and forth in the lawyer's office. Finally, he shouts in anger, "Here....here are the names of half a dozen men I fought with in order to get my money. I beat them. Leave it to them...leave it to them with my curses". And he storms angrily out of the lawyer's office...

The things which are ours do shape our lives and our values. They can curse life and make it cheap, ugly and empty, or they can bless life and make it happy, fruitful and meaningful. The difference rests in this matter of stewardship. When the things which are ours are in the center of our lives....controlling us....directing us...our sense of values becomes warped, and our spirits grow insensitive. But when we recognize God's ownership of the things which are ours, then we are stewards and not slaves. The way we use the things which are ours determines the kind of people we become.

Someone has said (and I like this definition): "A GENTLEMAN IS ONE WHO PUTS BACK INTO LIFE A LITTLE MORE THAN HE TAKES OUT OF IT". A sobering thought....examine your own life in light of this definition.

Jesus had a sure sense of value. He simplified life by selecting the essentials and not troubling himself about the rest. When we study his life, noting what he lived for....noting, too, what he lived without, we begin to see how relatively unimportant are so many things which we feel are necessary to our living. Some years ago I spent a couple of night in one of Nazareth's second rate hotels. I was pitying myself that I had to spend even one night in a place so lacking in modern comforts. Then I fell to thinking that Jesus lived there for thirty years in a far more primitive time and demonstrated the richest life ever lived. He came to put a finger of the priorities of life...to show us the goals of life's journeys....to help us take the first steps on the road to a life that is a life.

THE THINGS THAT ARE OURS CAN
HELP BUILD A BETTER WORLD

a better world. Eugene L. Smith reminds us that the Greek derivative or our word "idiot" was used back in the 5th century BC in Athens to describe the person of means who used his possessions for himself instead of the common good. Smith goes on to say: "WE ARE CLOSER THAN MOST OF US HAVE THE COURAGE TO ADMIT TO THE DAY WHEN GOD MAY YET WRITE OVER THE STORY OF AMERICA'S DELCINE, THE VERDICT "IDIOT". Strong language, but the facts support it.

There is one more thought I want to put before you and that is this: the things that are ours can help build

The story of America at this moment is the story of a people who are committing a smaller proportionate share of their wealth to the service of mankind than ever before. As we grow richer, we give less. At least this is true of the nation as a whole. Some people give more and more and these are the "salt of the earth". We deplore the crime and delinquency problem in our city - and yet the very institutions that can help remedy the situation - schools, churches, settlement houses - are woefully lacking in even minimum support. Help to the under-developed nations of the world - to the under-nourished and under-privileged peoples - ought to be of great concern to us. And yet we have a Congress whose mood reflects the vast numbers of people of our country - whose mood it is to reduce the amount that we give to help bring these peoples out of darkness and into greater light. Protestant Christianity in a given 12 month period last year gave a total of \$30,000,000 to mission causes around the world. Yet in a 24 hour period 625,000 people laid down more than \$57,000,000 on the horses at the Belmont race track.

Call it idiocy or not - call it what you will - the fact remains that Christian people in this country need to reexamine and reevaluate their support of the Christian enterprise. The witness of the Christian Church is the most vitally needed activity in the world today. It alone is the custodian of the eternal flame which can light man's way out darkness. The Church across the centuries has been the primary defender of the sanctity and dignity of the individual which is the basis of all freedm. The Church keeps alive that faith in God which is the final and sure defense of man against the godless philosophies which would destroy all human values. The Church is the channel and support of those moral laws and spiritual ideals that alone can restore decency and order to the race of men. in the critical days of mankind's history, God is not interested in our petty complaints and criticisms of the church - of what it is not doing and should be doing. I think God wants to know what you are doing to further its cause and strengthen its witness.

It is my conviction that there is nothing optional about our support of the Christian enterprise. You may disagree with me. It is the most pressing obligation we have. It is an obligation which cannot be discharged with haphazard methods of giving, with hapazard token gifts that represent the giving of a great many. The rate of giving of the vast majority of members of the Christian Church in America is pathetically small. The Bible, as you know, speaks of the tithe - 10% of one's income. The first 10% - not 10% of what is left after everything else is paid. You cannot build the Kingdom of God out of left-overs. And yet the chances that most of our giving does not get over the one or two percent level.

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Let me share with you some statistics concerning the giving of this church: we have about 35 members out of a membership of less than 300 who assume no financial responsibility toward their church. For this current year, about 50% of the pledges that were made averaged out to two dollars and less per week. This would mean about twenty-eights cents a day. I know there are some present to whom this is a great amount of money. I recognize this. However, there are others to whom twenty-eights cents is about the price of a package of cigarettes. I intensely dislike this type of comparison and I use it with great hesitation, but there are about sixty to seventy persons who have offered to give a package of cigarettes a day, or less, to the church - to repret their support of the Christian enterprise in this place. I do not know who they are. I have no desire to know who they are. I am giving you the facts of our giving.

Is this to be our answer to the challenge of materialism and atheism, paganism and secularism that threatens to destroy the great spiritual foundations and ideals of our nation. Frankly (and I know there are many exceptions)...but frankly I think that most of us should be embarrassed at the amount of our giving. The advancement of the Kingdom is a costly endeavor. We can have a free and a decent worl if we are willing to pay for it. And no money can do more in more ways that the money invested in the Christian enterprise for the service of mankind. The Church has a unique way of stretching a little a long ways.

If you who give grudgingly token gifts would double or triple your giving, I am confident you would find a new sense of spiritual vitality taking hold of your life. If the majority of you who look for spiritual nourishment in this outpost of the Christian enterprise, would catch the true spirit of Christian giving - the giving of one's self - time, talent, service, financial resources - giving without reservation, there would be an outpouring of God's spirit in this place that would electrify the church and enable us to do the job that needs to be done. ~~For the days ahead promise a growth and development beyond our greatest dreams. I hope that each of you will do his full share in making these dreams of service come true.~~

LET US PRAY: God, our Father, may Thy spirit brood over this congregation. Speak to us in these moments so that we may know what we should now do in offering to thee our share in this great undertaking. Open the hearts....enlighten the understanding of these thy people that we may extend the ministry of Jesus Christ in the year that is before us. Amen