

## Young People's Forum (III.19)

Dear Young People,

I finished our discussion on music and turn now to something else. You will recall that I am discussing the antithesis as it controls all the life of the people of God. I had talked about the antithesis between the music of a sinful world and the people of God.

With this letter I want to turn to a discussion of the antithesis between the world and God's covenant people in their attitude towards and use of earthly possessions.

This is not such an easy subject to discuss, not because the teaching of Scripture is unclear on our calling, but because even God's people quickly take offense when one begins to talk about their bank account or their retirement funds. Even God's people are very touchy about these things and quickly close their ears to anyone who wants to bring to them the word of God concerning these matters. But I guess I will risk your anger and go ahead anyway. The matter is important.

I do want you to know, however, that what I have to say is not something that comes from a man who has attained perfection in the use of earthly goods. As is true when I preach, it is also true now: I write for my own admonition and instruction as well as for yours.

The difficulty is, in large measure, due to the fact that the Lord has given us many earthly possessions. We live in affluence. We live in affluent countries. We share in this affluence. There are many of God's people, such as the saints in Myanmar, who know only poverty. One would think that we would be quickly satisfied when we have enough to eat for today and, probably next month – if not next year. But we are not easily satisfied. It seems that the more we have, the more we want. While we would never be satisfied with a bone with a few shreds of meat on it and marrow in it, the people in Myanmar (and elsewhere) would think they were given a feast if such a bone were offered them.

I read once that the American people throw enough food away every day to feed another nation of equal size with a diet far in excess of what they need. I know that to be true. My sister once worked in a Christian nursing home. At the end of the day there were whole pies left, which had not even been cut. My sister took one home once, but her boss said to her, "If you do that again, you will be fired, for we would be breaking the law; the government makes us throw away every bit of food that we have left."

I had a close friend who operated a wholesale food company. He sometimes went to food conventions. At one such convention, at the end of the meetings, a banquet was held in which liquor was served and a huge table, more than eighty feet long, was filled with foods of every sort. There were whole hams and whole shanks of beef for slicing. There were fish of every kind and cooked in every imaginable way. There were vegetables and salads. There were desserts that my friend did not know existed. After the banquet was finished, my friend noticed that only less than 20% of the food had been eaten. He asked the man in charge what was going to happen to all the food that was left. The man said, "It will all be dumped." My friend said, "Cannot it be given to the poor?" The man responded, "No, the government will not allow us to do that. It has to be thrown away."

Waste of God's gifts is a terrible sin. Whole civilizations have been destroyed by God because of God's punishment of the sin of wasting his good gifts and the things of his creation. One wonders

sometimes how long it will take before God destroys our affluent countries where the waste of his gifts in a way of life.

I even remember a time, when I was a small boy that my father brought me to a pig farm. These pigs were fed by garbage that had been collected from restaurants and hotels. The trucks would roll in and dump their garbage in huge pens where hundreds of pigs were fed. While most of the food was very good when it was thrown away, there was also, mixed with the garbage silverware from some of the most luxurious and expensive hotels and restaurants in the whole of Chicago. The pigs did not eat this silverware, of course, and so it was salvaged. We were very poor at the time, and so some of that silverware was given to us to use. The names of all the expensive eating places in Chicago were engraved on the silverware, with the result that my mother did not dare to use it when we had people over for a meal. They thought: "How can this family afford to eat in all these expensive places? And how do they dare steal the silverware?" It was an example of waste that made my eyes bulge, but it was my first lesson in the terrible sin of waste. Then I understood why my mother made us eat everything she set on the table, whether we liked it or not. Nor could we leave the table until our plates were empty. And nothing ever was thrown away that was at all edible. Nor did we have a refrigerator to keep things cold; all we had was a homemade box that had been insulated and in which we could put a block of ice.

To this day, even though we are much richer than we were in those days, I still have a guilty conscience about throwing food away – even if sometimes it does not taste very good any more.

One would think that when God gives us more than we can possibly use, we would be content. But we are not. We never are content. We always want more. We are, contrary to Jesus' words, always worried that we will not have enough for the future in a large savings account or pension plan– even though the future is far away. Matthew 6:24-34. Verse 34 reads: "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought of the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

These words are so embarrassing that we simply dismiss them with a wave of the hand. We cannot take them seriously. And so we hide behind our justifications for how we live. We have our lists of excuses handy: I must be a good steward and that means laying up for the future. God surely does not want us to live in poverty, does he? If I do not prepare for the future, then if I become sick I will have to be cared for by the deacons; and I do not want to be a burden to the church. Etc., etc., etc.

The trouble is that our preoccupation with earthly things and the need to enlarge our treasuries take our minds and hearts away from spiritual things. It is true, of course, that we do engage in spiritual activities as much as we have time for them, but if it comes to the point where we have to give up the one or the other, we are quick to give up spiritual activities in favor of our continued pursuit of earthly possessions.

These problems make us wonder how we are ever going to do what Paul says, for example, in Colossians 3:1, 2: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth." And, in connection with that calling, all kinds of questions arise in our minds that desperately need answering. Just a few of them are: Why do we go to school? Do we go so that we may get a good job and be financially successful? Why do we go overseas to study, sometimes in places where there is no good church? Is it perhaps because a degree from overseas will enhance our money-making ability? Or is it

just possible that we go to school so that we may better learn to serve God and be of use in his kingdom?

These are questions that need answering if we are to live antithetically as God's covenant people in a world of sin. I want to explore with you in some articles what the Scriptures teach concerning these things.

With our prayers for God's blessing on you,

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