

PEACE OF MIND - IT'S WONDERFUL?

Dr. John Allan Lavender
Jn. 14:27; Ephs. 6:10-17

One of the disturbing things about the teachings of Jesus is that they are loaded with contradiction, or so it seems to us who look at life through single vision glasses. But Christ was not hampered by such vision. He looked at life through what we might call Aspiritual bi-focals.[@] He knew that truth is not singular, but plural. It has a double edge. It is made up of a multitude of individual truths, none of which stand alone, all of which are interdependent. So He constantly presented His disciples with truth in the form of paradox, or apparent contradiction.

Let me show you what I mean. On one occasion He said we should avoid the danger of becoming hypocrites by doing our good deeds in public so people could see them. On another occasion, He said we should let our light shine so people could see our good works. A paradox? Yes. A contradiction? No. For you see, it's not a case of either/or, but both/and. The complete truth regarding good works is they must be done -- whether public or private -- in a spirit of humility as a witness to God's goodness, not our own.

Or look at His teaching regarding prayer. In one place He said that when we pray we should shut the door and pray in absolute privacy. In another place, He said where two or three are gathered in His name, He is in their midst. A paradox? Yes. A contradiction? No. The truth regarding prayer, like all truth, has a double edge. Jesus wanted us to know prayer is both a public and private affair.

Or again, Jesus was constantly bumping up against the obstructionism of Hebrew tradition and law which made it difficult for Him to fulfill his mission on Earth. As a result, He denounced the Pharisees for practicing a religion which was nothing more than rigid tradition and hollow forms. And yet, at the same time, He saw the incalculable value of God's law and great tradition and so He said, *AI am not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it.*[@]

His whole ministry of teaching was characterized by a careful balance which emphasized the double-edged nature of truth. Jesus knew that individual truths are often half-truths. That is to say, they do not stand alone, but are interdependent. Unfortunately, the rest of us rarely possess this spiritual sensitivity. We discover a precious truth and then, instead of using it in its proper context, we exploit it to our own detriment. We over-emphasize one side of life, while we ignore its equally important counterpart, and that which begins as a virtue (bringing balance), becomes a vice (producing imbalance).

Such is certainly the case with the cult which has infiltrated many Christian circles. For want of a better name, I call it

AThe Cult Of The Comfortable.@"

It is made up of an alarmingly large group of those who have fallen under the hypnotic spell of the 20th century's Pied Pipers who play a lilting tune called:

APeace of Mind.@"

Perhaps you've heard the story that's been making the rounds about a young woman who went to a salesperson in a book store and said,

AI want that new Book: >A Piece of Your Mind= by Rabbi Sheen.@"

Well, there's nothing wrong with peace of mind. Whether it be the variety of Bishop Sheen, Rabbi Liebmann, or my friend Norman Vincent Peale. In its proper sense, the sense in which Jesus promised it, peace of mind is of tremendous value. Unfortunately, it has been distorted and even exploited, until this precious virtue has become a vice.

As a result, it is being used by Satan to undermine the true nature and purpose of Christian peace which is not to go out into the world and relax, but to go out into the world relaxed! Listen to this quote from one of the recent best sellers that has been propagating this new Phenobarbital philosophy of AGo ye into all the world and relax.@" This noted author says,

AThe life of inner peace, being harmonious and without stress, is the easiest type of existence.@"

Is that what the Christian life is supposed to be? At the easiest kind of existence? If so, this new de-caffinated brand of Christianity has nothing whatsoever to do with Christ. When He challenged people to follow Him, He talked about a yoke, a burden, and a cross! If this religion of bovine complacency is Christianity, then the New Testament is wrong. For it warns us that the Christian life is a warfare, and we must put on the whole armor of God in order to stand.

Now, before you think I'm going off half-cocked, let me affirm the fact that there is a genuine Christian peace. And I can say to you from personal experience, it's fabulous! I couldn't exist without it. No one can successfully meet the vicissitudes of life without the foundation of real tranquility.

At peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you,@ said Jesus.

But He added,

Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.@

He was not talking about the sluggish languor that is currently being peddled under the Christian banner. Rather, He was promising a deep well of serenity which would enable us to live above the common harassments of life at the very moment we are engaged in hand-to-hand combat for their defeat.

He knew,@ as Harry Emerson Fosdick points out, that if a man is going to lift the world, he must have something solid upon which to rest his lever.@ And so, Jesus promised a peace that would not produce sedation, but stimulation. He wanted His people to put off the affliction of self-pity and be busy in some powerful activity. That's what He meant when He said:

I have not come to bring peace, but a sword@ (Matt:34).

He was not contradicting Himself. He was presenting another side of a great truth. He was trying to show us that the Christian life is not one long night of peaceful slumber -- a kind of opium smokers disassociation from reality -- but, rather, the Christian life is a happy combination of inner peace and divine dissatisfaction. It is this balance, this combination of the

two, which reveals the real truth regarding life and helps us keep it on even keel.

Again, let me show you what I mean. Suppose the good Lord had so created the solar system as to be at what someone has called AHeat Peace.® That is, a situation in which every part of the Universe is constantly at the same degree of temperature. What would happen? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Actually, it would mean death. We could not exist in such a state of intolerable sameness, for if everything was constantly at the same degree, it would then become impossible for us to extract heat energy from one part of the solar system to be used elsewhere for some constructive purpose. And, in the last analysis, we would die. That=s the physical counterpart of perfect Apeace of mind.® Nothing happens. Nothing can happen. Some may call it peace, but it would be more accurate to call it what it really is -- death!

My scientist friends have a humorous puzzle which asks,

AHow can we prove the temperature of hell is uniform?@

The answer runs something like this,

AIf the temperature of hell were not the same at every point, then some scientist in hell (and the scientist who told me this story conceded there would probably be plenty of scientists available there) would set up a heat engine which would use this difference in temperature as a means of making energy available. Then this scientist would use this energy to run a refrigeration unit which would cool down some place in hell until it was a comfortable temperature. But, you see, it is contradictory to the basic idea of hell that any spot in it should be comfortable. Thus, one concludes by the classical reductio ad absurdum, that the assumed difference cannot exist. Hell, therefore, is at a uniform temperature.®

We can chuckle, but let's remember the place said to be at perfect physical peace -- that is, uniform and never-changing -- is not heaven, it is hell! That's the whole point of the story, and of my sermon. To strive for peace of mind as an end in itself is to ultimately awaken to the fact that you have forsaken heaven, and are living in hell.

Where on God's green earth did we get the idea that security and pleasant living -- the absence of difficulty and the presence of ease -- could, in themselves, make us happy? As a matter of fact, the opposite is often the case. Some of the happiest people I know have little monetary security or physical ease, and some of the most unhappy people I know have both.

The Scandinavians have a saying which we would do well to remember in these days when the 20th century pied pipers seek to lure us with their siren song called A Peace Of Mind. @ The Scandinavian saying goes like this:

A The North wind make the Vikings. @

These people of sturdy stock did not just happen. They developed through hardship, difficulty, and pain. They would never have gained a reputation as men of strength and valor by scurrying for cover when the North wind began to blow.

A Good sailors were never made on calm seas. @

This is a lesson the Church needs to learn. There is a moral flabbiness about a lot of Christians today that is frightening to behold. They clamor for spiritual aspirins. As long as you preach a kind of Phenobarbital religion, they're happy. But, they want nothing of the cross.

I have a ministerial friend out in San Bernardino, California for whom I have preached on several occasions. The last time I saw him, he told me how he had announced a series of sermons on the subject: A Peace of Mind. @ For three Sunday nights, the church could not hold the crowd. At the conclusion of the third message, he announced that the following Sunday evening he would speak on: A The Christian and the Cross. @ In his own words, A The next Sunday there were more in the choir than there were in the pews! A

That's the alarming thing about this Cult of the Comfortable. As someone has said,

It knows nothing about the crown of thorns Jesus wore, or the cross on which He died. It knows nothing of the beatings, the lashings, and the imprisonment of Paul. Nothing of the pioneers and martyrs who were burned at the stake, or hacked to pieces, or boiled in oil, or stewed over the fire of the cannibals. @

And I would be quick to add, the Cult of the Comfortable does not want to hear of such unpleasantries. It prefers to think happy, positive, pampering thoughts which do not unsettle their complacency.

What does it matter that the world is on the brink of disaster?

What does it matter that people are lost?

What does it matter that our nation is in an ethical free-fall?

Just stick your head in the psychological sand of A positive thinking@ and pretend all is well, and it will be so.

Just make sure you follow these seven simple steps to carefree living, or that fail-safe formula for financial success, and you'll be alright.

In the place of the helmet, the shield, and the sword which were the badge of early Christianity, the Cult of the Comfortable has substituted a smoking jacket, a pair of slippers, and an easy chair. Maybe that's why, with church membership at an all-time high, the influence of the Church is at an all-time low!

There are those who say religion is the opiate of the people. If they're talking about the religion which only preaches A peace of mind, @ I say they are right. That kind of milk-and-water religion is the opiate of the people. It makes them soft and cynical. But that kind of easy religion has nothing whatsoever to do with Christ.

Let me pause again to make it abundantly clear that Christ does offer peace. Perhaps you came

to church this morning with a troubled heart. If so, Christ is prepared to calm the turbulent waters of your soul with the quiet words:

A Peace, be still. @

But to the vast majority of us, He has another word, and this morning He walks these aisles and mounts this pulpit. As He stands before us and seeks to minister to our greatest need, I can hear Him say,

A Along with Peace, I have brought a sword. If you follow me, it will mean blood, sweat and tears. I did not come to make life easy.
I came to make people great. @

When you begin to realize that is Christ=s purpose in dealing with you, then you begin to understand A peace of mind@ is not an end in itself, any more than sleep is an end in itself. A night of rest is a wonderful place from which to start a new day. Without it, we would not exist for long. But no healthy person wants to sleep forever.

The same is true of a healthy Christian. He or she does not strive for peace of mind to the exclusion of divine discontent. Rather, a healthy Christian accepts inner peace as a gift from God and then forgets about it, as he or she plunges recklessly into the revolutionary task of bringing to Gospel of true peace, the peace of God, to the world.

It=s not a case of choosing between activity and tranquility. It=s a case of accepting both in their proper setting. For when we come to Christ, He not only gives us our own peculiar responsibilities, but, simultaneously He also gives us the resources we need to meet those responsibilities.

Peace of Mind -- It=s Wonderful? In it=s proper place, yes! It is absolutely indispensable. It provides the underpinning which enables us to live above the harassments of life. But taken out of context -- made an end in itself -- it becomes an opiate which dulls our sensitivities and numbs

our conscience.

We become satisfied with the state of the world.

We become content with the moral bankruptcy of our time.

The issues of life and death become lost in the ugly fog of amorality in which nothing is really right or wrong, black or white, just various tints of gray.

And so, we come at last to a state of being in which we want nothing more than peace and quiet. Freedom from exhortation.

It is then that the priceless virtue Godly peace becomes a deadly vice, and as such, it is something to be shunned as we would shun a plague.

For on the day we lose our restlessness,
on the day we lose our divine dissatisfaction with life on the lower plane,
on the day we are satisfied to give first-rate loyalties to second-rate causes,
on the day we let the Church become one more pot on an already overcrowded stove,
on the day we become so dull and grey, so complacent and apathetic as to be at peace in a world
which is very much at war,
on that day we miss out on heaven, and discover we have chosen hell!

Father, root us out of the rut which is really a premature grave, the rut of easy, self-centered, complacent living. Show us the meaning of true peace, the peace that Jesus gives. Fill us with that peace, and then send us forth to do something for Jesus' sake and ours.

Amen.