

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Number:			Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 6:33; Colossians 3:1-5; Hebrews 12:1, 2		
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New Year's Priorities: Put Forth the Effort

"How are we to order our lives?" asks B.B. Warfield in his masterful handling of our text. "How are we to provide for our households – or, for our own bodily wants? Is it true that we can trust the eternal welfare of our souls to God and cannot trust to Him the temporal welfare of our bodies? Is it true that He has provided salvation for us at the tremendous cost of the death of His Son, and will not provide food for us to eat and clothes for us to wear at the cost of the directive word that speaks and it is done? Is it true that we can stand by the bedside of our dying friend and send him forth into eternity in good confidence in God, and cannot send that same friend forth into the world with any confidence that God will keep him there?"¹ One of our well-known contemporary Bible expositors picks up on this refrain and says, "We all have to admit that worry is a common temptation in life. It is a favorite pastime for many. It can occupy one's thoughts for a great portion of the day. However, worry cruelly inflicts a severe toll. But far beyond the need to avoid its psychological and physiological effects is the reality that Jesus commands us not to do it, thus making it clear that worry is a sin. The Christian who worries is really saying, "God, I know You mean well by what You say, but I'm not sure You can pull it off." Anxiety is blatant distrust of the power and love of God. In spite of its lack of subtlety, we fall into it so easily and so often."²

THE CONTEXT: Beginning in 6:19, Jesus warns his disciples about the folly of pursuing earthly treasure and seeking to serve two masters. The great question that confronts us here is this: what is our ultimate concern? What is it that we live for? What is *distinctive* Christian living? "Jesus' disciples must live lives qualitatively different from those of people who have no trust in God's fatherly care and no fundamental goals beyond material things."³

I. OUR LORD'S APPEAL

6:33 begins with the positive counterpart to the negative warnings of 6:25, 28 and 31. The language of the text serves to indicate an action (*seek first*). This priority is not one that merely tops the list but actually governs everything else in our lives.

A. Seek

This word ZĒTEŌ has a fairly wide range of meaning, but it primarily means to actively pursue or strive after (note v. 32 where the pagans are said "to run after" these things. The word is EPIZĒTOU a strengthened form of ZĒTEŌ). The term underscores not simply an activity but an attitude. Christ's disciples are to be controlled by this mind set and are to be driven in pursuit of one ultimate quest.

II. OUR LORD'S PROMISE

If we do seek first and foremost His Kingdom and righteousness then He will *add* all these things. The righteousness spoken of in this text has reference not to justification but to the pursuit of righteousness of life (as in Matthew 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1) in full submission to the will of God.

Anything less than this is considered by Jesus to be pagan – i.e. to be ambitious only for personal interest.

A. Things Given

Our text promises that God will *add* (PROSTITHEMI) provisionally those material things that we have need of. A word of caution is needed here. The text does not say, as Warfield points out, “‘and all these things shall be your reward.’ It does not propose to pay us for seeking God’s Kingdom and righteousness by giving us earthly things. It says: ‘and all these things shall be added unto you.’ The Greek word is not the word for pay, reward, but for the small gratuitous addition to the promised wages, given as we should say ‘in the bargain.’ The worldly goods that come to us are in a word here represented not as our reward, but as something ‘in the bargain.’ The appeal of the passage is made to rest elsewhere; that is, in the contrast between goods earthly and goods heavenly.”⁴

III. DUTY CALLS

The New Testament frequently uses the imagery of the footrace to portray the Christian life. This imagery aptly represents various aspects of our salvation. God calls us to this race (Philippians 3:14). We train for this race (I Timothy 4:7-8). Our training entails strict self-control (I Corinthians 9:25). Anyone who runs this race must compete according to the rules (II Timothy 2:5). There is a prize to be won (I Corinthians 9:24), and anyone who seeks to win the prize must run with singular devotion, with one’s eyes set on the prize who is Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:1-2).⁵ Erich Sauer develops this theme by first highlighting,

“The author of the Hebrews letter declares that we should run with patience the race ‘that is set before us’ (Heb. 12:1). This does not only mean the race as lying before us from the viewpoint of time or, so to speak, space. What is meant is something dynamic. The race (Gk. *agon*) is ‘set before us’ as our *task*. It is our *duty* to run. The race is God-appointed (Gk. *prokeimenon*). The phrase *Prokeitai agon!* (Lat. *Propositum est certamen*), ‘The battle lieth before!’ was the usual Greek (answering to the Latin) expression for the race which was to be run, and which was publicly announced by a crier, together with the rules of the race and the prize.

You cannot separate your own personal life of faith from being a runner in a race. God has appointed that you should *run*. True sanctification can be experienced practically only in a life of a Spirit-energized dynamic effort, and this effort involves our whole being, spirit, soul, and body. He who will not run in the race has from the very start abandoned the crown and the prize of victory. And as Satan, the great adversary, never admits being beaten until his final overthrow (Rev. 20:10), the battle and the race will never end for us until we have reached the goal of our course.

This means that you must take your personal responsibility very seriously. You must reckon in confident faith with the victorious powers of Christ the Saviour. But on the other hand do not overlook the reality of the enemy. Weigh seriously all the paralyzing powers which emanate from him. Concentrate on the goal. Live in the holy energy of a consecrated life. We can never make peace with sin. Never forget that a real life of faith means a running in the race. Remember: ‘And if also a man contend in the games, he is not crowned, except he have contended lawfully’ (II Tim. 2:5). The new birth is not the finishing-post but the starting-post. If you would reach the finishing-post, you must *run*.”⁶

The Apostle Paul exhorts the Colossians in similar fashion. In the first part of the third chapter of the Epistle to the Colossians, we have noticed several admonitions for living the full life in Jesus Christ:

1. “Seek The Heavenly” (3:1-4)
2. “Slay The Earthly” (3:5-9)
3. “Strengthen The Christly” (3:10-11)

Beginning in verses 8-10, Paul uses the metaphor of “putting off” and “putting on” to describe what is necessary to grow as Christians. He continues this metaphor in verse 12, as he expands upon the things Christians are to “put on”. The Christian who is risen with Christ has a new focal point. His spring of motivation is set in the world of God to which he looks upward. Paul’s call is a resounding *sursum corda*: up with your hearts! No longer is the believer earth-bound and circumscribed in his outlook and attitudes like the “man that could look no way but downwards, with a muck-rake in his hand,” whom Interpreter showed to Christiana. Yet that heavenly frame of reference will make him a better citizen of society and give him new impetus to serve God and the world in His name.⁷

CONCLUSION: There is a very real danger that we face as Christians and that is the danger of living like practical atheists. The Bible describes the folly of the person who *says* “there is no God” (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). Practical atheism does not *say* there is no God. Rather the practical atheist *lives* as if there were no God. The practical atheist is guilty of the heinous sin of forgetting the God it professes to believe in. This, I say again, is a grave danger we all face. “How prone we are to limit and circumscribe the sphere in which we practically allow for God! We feel His presence and activity in some things but not in others; we seek His blessing in some matters for not in others; we look for His guidance in some affairs but not in others; we can trust Him in some crises and with some of our hopes but not in or with others. This too is a practical atheism. And it is against all such practical atheism that our passage enters its protest. It protests against men living as if they were the builders of their own houses, the architects of their own fortunes. It protests against men reckoning in anything without God.”⁸ I close with these words of wisdom from Lee Irons, a friend and graduate from Westminster Seminary. “Whether or not you are into New Year’s resolutions, consider making this year a year in which you develop a closer relationship with Christ. By that I don’t (merely) mean that you will study the Bible more, attend church more faithfully, work on some besetting sin, or strive to be a better father/mother, husband/wife, employee/boss, etc. These are all good and necessary things, but a person can do them and still not be any closer to Christ. Moralism is not a substitute for spirituality. By developing a closer relationship with Christ I mean talking with him about your life, your problems, your anxieties, and your hopes. Laying before him your difficult relationships. Appealing to him for strength in the battle for personal holiness and for fulfilling your responsibilities. Asking him to guide you in your decisions. Reaching out to him in your times of need. Personal Bible reading and attendance on the public means of grace play a role in this, for it is as you get to know Christ better through the word and sacraments that you grow in Christ. You can only have a personal relationship with someone you know, and you can only know who Jesus is through the Scriptures. But – it is possible for someone to know a lot of doctrinal facts about Christ and yet not have a living relationship with him. As Reformed people that is a constant danger for all of us. We are always in danger of becoming Pharisees, a people who honors the Lord with our lips, but our hearts are far from him (Matthew 15:8).”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ B.B. Warfield, *Faith & Life* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 45.

² J. MacArthur, Jr., *Anxiety Attacked: Applying Scripture to the Cares of the Soul* (Victor, 1993), p. 15.

³ D.A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 181.

⁴ Warfield, op. cit., p. 80.

⁵ T.R. Schreiner and A.B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (IVP, 2001), p. 19.

⁶ Erich Sauer, *In The Arena of Faith: A Call to The Consecrated Life* (Eerdmans, 1955), p. 68.

⁷ R.P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church’s Lord and The Christian’s Liberty* (Zondervan, 1972), p. 102.

⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

⁹ [http://www.upper-register.com/blog/Jan. 1, 2008](http://www.upper-register.com/blog/Jan.1,2008).