

Discriminate Evaluation of Life's Basic Principles

By
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“And Naboth said to Ahab, The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee” (I Kings 21:3).

[Editor's Note: Sermon preached at commencement at Emmanuel College not long before his death.]

Contained in this ancient episode are the combined elements of human depravity and sterling nobility in mortal clash where the stakes are high and compromise is impossible. All of the basic emotions and drives that move men to dastardly deeds of crime or exalt them to the shimmering heights of chivalry are revealed in this drama. The philosophy of materialism bares its wolfish fangs before the conservative principle of preservation of a priceless legacy.

Antiquated by the on-going ages, overshadowed by more important events of that far-off day, this brief tragedy steps out of the pages of the past to haunt us, to speak to us, to shout at us until we pause for a moment and realize that the curtains are raised again. The drama unfolds. We are on the stage in the bright glare of the footlights. We are the actors and the setting is the same. Change the names, the place, the dates, and we hear the same sinister voice of greedy materialism, “Give me thy vineyard” and the staunch, unfaltering reply, “God forbid that I should barter the inheritance of my father to you.”

In this festive hour for you distinguished graduates, I could not be so impractical as to dim your exuberance by appearing pessimistic and trying to be too melodramatic, but sensing the trend of our times, and knowing by experience something of the icy indifference of the main stream of human society to the ache of a broken heart, I feel that

I must try to engrave the gravity of the issues on your hearts today that it may soften their spear thrust into your sensitive souls tomorrow.

Human needs are basic and they have re-occurred a million times to vex and baffle men of every age. To borrow a statement from the conversation around the supper table in Bethany, said Judas, “Why was not this sold and given to the poor.” To this, the quiet and timeless retort of Jesus, “The poor you have with you always, but me ye have not.” There are some situations, problems, and experiences that are peculiar to a particular locality, age, season, or generation; but others are universal and timeless, established complexities that cannot be divorced from life. Like fixed stars in the firmament, every time we lift our eyes to the heavens, they are there.

It is of special significance to notice the wisdom of Jesus in refusing to deal with transitory, secular, and local perplexities of the people of his day. Upon those issues that were recurrent, perpetual, and universal, he gave most illuminating decisions. For example, the question of the Sabbath: “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.” Here he lifts a vexed issue out of the arbitrary, rigid, and non-natural into the free and vital necessities of human well-being. Again, “not what goeth into a man, but the things that proceedeth out of the man defile.” Here is shown for all time in relative importance that it is the moral over the ceremonial. Then, “what therefore God hath joined together let no man put asunder,” summing up once and for all that the thing implicit in marriage is making the spiritual tie the secret, thereby underscoring its sanctity and its security.

He answers his disciples for intolerance towards another worker, “Forbid him not for he that is not against us is for us.” He here places ecclesiastical irregularity beneath

spiritual loyalty to God and human service. Finally, in the question of tribute money, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus defines both the duty and limitations of citizenship. We are to render unto Caesar his due, and unto God his right. He did not mean that Caesar and God are rivals. Like it or not, Caesar is a servant of God or a man under God’s authority. Paul said, “The powers that be, are ordained of God.” He is saying that citizenship implies duty, obligation, and responsibility. But he pointed out that beyond the duties of citizenship in this world, that the claims of God are equally impervious and not to be denied. God has a valid claim on our allegiance because at the bottom of every great issue of life is the spiritual.

Jesus had a great deal to say about values: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? Ye are of more value than many sparrows. Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings? Ye are of more value than many sparrows.” They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value. They put a price on his head. Who? The children of Israel. They said, “He is worth \$17.00 to us.” They found a taker. History’s most shameful barter. Where did they get this value scale? By what criterion did they arrive at this figure? Was it the standard price of a slave? Had the market taken a dip that day? On the black market, Judas sold his Lord for thirty pieces of silver. They bargained for the Son of God in monetary terms.

The whole substance of life can be reduced to two principles: material and spiritual. Everything with which we have to do is directly or indirectly related to these two things. We cannot separate them. We cannot divorce them. We are challenged by both. The tests of life are found in our discriminate evaluation and selectivity between the

two. The ancient birthright contained in it benefits the elements of both. To qualify for the material, one must accept the responsibility for the preservation of the spiritual.

Esau is a classic example of one who despised the spiritual and lost the material. He sold his birthright for one morsel. Baalim tried to have all of both. He fingered in the mud with one hand and reached for the stars with the other. While reaching for two worlds at once, he lost both. As we strive for a place of security and success, we dare not forget that Jesus is building a kingdom in this world, and we can and must be a citizen of both, giving this world its due, but God his right.

Ahab said to Naboth, "I will give you a better vineyard or I will pay you what it is worth in money." To Ahab it was just another vineyard. He placed a monetary value on it. It could be bought or traded he thought. Ahab believed every man had his price. He would even be willing to take a little loss to make the deal. To Naboth it was more than a vineyard. It was an inheritance that had meaning and sentiment. It was a legacy, his very life. It was not for sale. He loved it. He was to hold it in trust. It belonged to him by birthright. He did not buy it, therefore, he would not sell it. Sooner would he sell his soul than part with his birthright. It was sacrilege to put a price upon it.

Here is courage at its best.

Here is conviction that will not falter.

Here is loyalty that cannot be bought.

Here is integrity that is not for sale.

Here is a choice of values that dignified Naboth and inscribed his name in gold on the walls of the immortal hall of fame.

Life will be full of tests for you, but there will be no final exams. Your final grade will be based on an accumulation of your dailies – your constant decisions, your evaluation of spiritual things, your loyalty to duty, your respect for truth, your preservation of virtue, your esteem for righteousness, your love for God, your defense of honor, your diligence in your calling. Your appreciation for your birthright will be the criterion by which your life will be measured and will be a guidepost to a sure and certain destiny. Out there in tomorrow's world, you will find yourself snatched into the rat race of the marts of trade. You too will be forced to buy and sell and get gain. Your life will have a debit and credit sheet. The way you barter will determine how the book balances at the close of life's day.

Twenty years ago, I gave a little boy a quarter and told him to go to the store and spend it all. I said, "The way you spend that money will tell much about your future." After long indecision the little boy came back and handed me the quarter and said, "I was afraid to take the chance." For twenty years that boy has lived a frustrated life of indecision.

You have received a priceless legacy here at Emmanuel College. The rock-like stability of the spirit of President W. G. Drum has woven itself into the very bloodstream of Emmanuel College, and consequently, left its indelible stamp upon your life. The discipline and restraint imposed upon you here may one day be the last anchor of your soul to stop you short of that hour of reckless abandon.

You have learned in the study of science and the arts that each has its own basic laws and principles. In chemistry there must be a catalyst to cause a reaction upon one or more substances to transform them into useful elements. In math the plus sign

presupposes an equation. In music the fundamentals are still sound, rhythm, and pitch. In the study of the Bible and the search for truth, you discover the secret of your own heart, the key to all knowledge, and the criterion to test every principle of life. The Bible is the final authority on every question of life. The whole Bible lives and throbs and personifies the one great prototype in whom there can be no error and by whom a mistake is impossible; therefore, it is the one blazing beacon under whose microscopic light every experience of life can be tested. In this age of confusion and frustration, the Bible speaks with the same authority on contemporary perplexities that it did two thousand years ago. The Bible teaches the power of love, but this world is dominated by the love of power. These are diametrically opposed to each other. It is a fight to the finish, a conflict to the death. Where will it finally be settled? On the battlefield of your own soul.

In the crucible of tomorrow's experience, you will be tested in your faith, your religion, and your church. You will hear the militant mourners propagating a religion of brotherhood. But don't get confused:

It must be unity, not uniformity.

It must be fellowship, not fusion.

It must be fraternity, not federation.

We do not want the various religions merged into one mush of concession and compromise. That would mean the impoverishment of all, each losing its distinctive mission and message in an indistinguishable blur. You have a heritage from your church and college:

A doctoral distinctive

A personal conviction

A standard of principles

An appreciation for purity

A loyalty to an ideal.

These are your treasures. Write across them in living letters of fire – Not for Sale. Live by them, and if need be, die for them. The generation that waits to follow you will have no light if yours goes out. They will have no faith if you falter. They will have no purity if you are defiled, no heritage if you sell out. Preserve it as long as the blood runs hot in your veins and then pass it to the eager hands of those who will not have waited in vain.

I stood a few days ago by the graveside of Lt. Col. Eugene Myers. In rigid statuette I listened to the staccato of the twenty-one guy salute. I heard, as a man in a daze, the clarion voice of the Chaplain reading a poem of eulogy. Then somewhere in the distance behind me, the melancholy blast of taps rolled in even tones out over the shadowy forest as the bugler sounded the final refrain. With eyes dimmed by tears, I reminisced. Here was a man, an alumnus of Emmanuel College, who had put God first in his life, and by the power of highly discriminate choice, he had served God faithfully, his church well, and his country loyally. Snatched from this firmament in the very peak of his life, I wondered why. Then, out of the past, I heard a whisper: “It is not how long you live but how well; and it matters not when you fall, it is the direction in which you are headed when you go down that counts.”

Methusaleh still holds the record for birthdays, but nothing else. The Bible writes his biography in one short line. He lived 969 years and died. In baseball language, no hits, no runs, no errors. To a graduating class here years ago, I said, “Be ashamed to die

until you have done something worthwhile for humanity and made this world a better place to live by your having lived in it.”