

Lessons from the words of Christ in Luke 12: 22-31.

Were we submitted to a cross-examination as to our conception of the daily conduct and attitude of mind which should be manifested by a true disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, I do not know of any better reply than a recital of the words of the Master himself, to be found respectively in the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of Matthew, and in the twelfth chapter of Luke—part of which we have now to consider for a few minutes.

In those chapters of Matthew's gospel which I have mentioned, we have what is called "The Sermon on the Mount," containing, as we know, a very comprehensive lesson as to our behaviour towards those with whom we have to mingle, both inside and outside the brotherhood. Christ there clearly defines our relative position in the society of mankind; but in the discourse of Christ which we are now considering his words come nearer home and concern particularly the individual as an individual, and regardless of his social standing. And, in both these discourses, the words of Christ contain lessons which apply to every brother and sister in every age. In the case of the present subject in particular, it would seem, so far as we can tell, that the application of the lesson is more appropriate and necessary today than it was at the time of its utterance.

It has been said that there are two kinds of philosophy, the true and the false. There is the false philosophy of the worldly man who accepts everything as inevitable, and who achieves high reputation—if not during his lifetime, then subsequently—for his indifference to circumstances either of ease and affluence or of poverty and hardship. These so-called philosophers will sometimes incur a considerable amount of privation and self-denial in the pursuit of the ideals which they profess, but if we probe a little below the surface it is not long before we find the cankerous growth at the root. The underlying motives prove to be altogether unworthy, judged by divine standards; man is the exalted being and God is left altogether out of account.

On the other hand, in the words of Christ which we are considering, we have the true philosophy, a state of mind in tune with its Maker. Not a callous indifference to our circumstances, nor a sullen fortitude in the face of difficulties. These words are, in fact, an elaboration of that commandment which Christ urged as the first of all commandments, "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*" All other things are subservient to this in the mind of Christ, but we find in our daily experience that the divine order of things is entirely reversed. The world's dictum is, "Attend to your business, attend to your homes, attend to your pleasures and recreations, fulfil your duties as a citizen;" and then, if you are able to do all these things so efficiently as to have any time left over, you can, if you feel so inclined, go in for a little piety—provided always that it is done in a genteel manner and with due regard for the susceptibilities of one's neighbours.

Fortunately, however, we have very clear evidence, both in the Word of Truth and in our own experiences, that we are under no obligation to the world, and we note particularly that Christ, in uttering these words, addressed himself specifically to his disciples.

As we study these gospels we find that Christ fitted his remarks to his audience, or to that particular section of his listeners whom he wanted to teach or rebuke. Sometimes his words were exclusive to those who did not accept his authority or teaching and we remember what stinging words of censure he used on certain occasions. At other times he addressed individuals amongst those of his followers who came to him for advice, notably in the case of the rich young man—an incident which has recently been so cunningly misapplied by some who certainly know better but have not courage to confess it. On the present occasion we see that, whoever else may have been in the audience, Christ's remarks were confined to his disciples as a body, and we therefore know that *we* not only *can* but *must* apply them to ourselves if we are to justify our position as his brethren.

These words of Christ are so entrancing that we always find pleasure in reading them and in hearing them read. The figures employed are so appropriate, and the language with which the ideas are clothed is so simple and yet so majestic as to be almost poetical. But Christ did not deliver these lessons merely as word-pictures to be framed and hung on the bedroom wall. *

If any practical application of these words of Christ is attempted it is generally in justification of license, or at any rate of improvidence and laziness, rather than in the sense in which the words were intended; and even in our own cases, with all the best of intentions, I am sure we all have the utmost difficulty in disengaging ourselves sufficiently from the entanglements of our earthly cares to exhibit the faith and patience which Christ enjoins.

"Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on."

What a reversal of the present-day order of things, and what havoc would be wrought if these precepts were applied wholesale and in a strictly literal manner. It is difficult to name two things which more completely dominate the masses today than those of eating and drinking, and of bodily adornment. More business deals are done over the luncheon table than in any other way, and there is hardly a contract of any importance which is not saturated (the world says "cemented") in wine or spirits; while as for the domestic and social spheres, these pay a homage amounting almost to reverence at the shrine of Dame Fashion. We need not worry very much about that, because it is to us a manifest token that the sands of time, so far as gentile dominion is concerned, have almost run out, for we know that, *As it was in the days of Noah, so also shall it be in the day of Christ's return*. And we remember, in any case, that these words were addressed to his disciples and were not for world-wide application.

But, while wisely applying these rules of conduct to ourselves, we must be watchful as to *how* we apply them. Christ did not teach entire indifference to our bodily needs or appearance, and his injunctions to "Take no thought" did not mean that we were to be thought-*less*. Suitable bodily nourishment, clothing, and suchlike things are necessary, and we have to take our part in providing them. That Christ recognised this is evident, for he says, *"The Father knoweth that we have NEED of these things."* Obviously the lesson is that these things must take their relative place in our thoughts, that ALL temporal considerations are to be absolutely subservient to our first duty of seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

We have a similar lesson in the words of the Psalmist who, speaking of the wicked, says, *"God is not in all his thoughts."* He does not mean by that that the righteous are to exclude all other thoughts but thoughts of God Himself—that would be impossible of achievement. What is meant is that God must have the *first place* in *all* our thoughts. All our words and actions are preceded by thoughts, and if all our thoughts are blended with a remembrance of God and our relative position as subjects of His creation and vessels of His mercy, our words and deeds will be in harmony with His will.

* We all know the little weakness of seaside landladies and hotel keepers in this respect. When you have been sleeping for a fortnight with "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver" suspended over your pillow, one cannot but accept the unknown extras on the bill without demur—and that is about all the use the world has for Biblical texts.

"The life is more than meat" says Christ, and you also remember that on another occasion he said, *"Labour not for the meat that perisheth."* Christ did not mean that we were to abstain from feeding the body, or that our present life could be sustained on faith alone apart from the nourishment which God in His bounty provides. The *Life* of which Christ here speaks is the unending life which he has the power to bestow upon those who shall be approved when he returns. What Christ was undoubtedly tilting at was a spirit of covetousness, and a lack of faith in the ability of God to provide for the future in the same way that He has provided in the past. It is evident from the parable of the rich man who decided to build store-houses for his goods and to take his ease, that such a condition of things

prevailed in Christ's day, but in our own times the pursuit of creature comforts has become such an obsession as to exclude all other thoughts from men's minds. It is in fact a mental disease which, unlike other mental ailments, is extremely contagious, and it therefore constitutes a very serious menace to the brethren and sisters of Christ who every day have to come into close contact with the infected ones, and to breathe the same mental atmosphere. It is a fact that faithful brethren are constantly declaring, and which cannot be too frequently urged, that the greatest danger to which any brother or sister can be exposed is a state of prosperity in excess of their reasonable needs; and Christ unquestionably had that fact in his mind when he warned his followers against ambition of this sort. The possession of wealth or a condition of prosperity is not in itself a vice, and we know that there are cases on record, both in the Holy Writings and in our own times, where affluence has been no barrier to faithfulness; but so far as we can judge, such cases form an exceedingly small minority.

We think, however, that the meaning of Christ goes further than the mere accumulation of wealth, for even those in comparatively modest circumstances can, and frequently do, make the mistake of giving undue prominence to the things which are seen, and which therefore are only temporal. We encounter some who will toil and pinch and scrape, and make themselves utterly miserable, in order to provide, as they think, for the future—a purely hypothetical future. They desire to make provision for an early retirement so that they can, as they ingeniously put it, be freed from the necessity of earning their living and so be able to devote themselves entirely to the Truth's service: and, just to prove their anxiety to engage in the work of the Truth, they entirely neglect that work while they endeavour to accumulate sufficient substance so that, as they say, they can "Do the thing properly." Or, perhaps, if they are not ambitious in that way, there are some (in fact we know there are), who, while not having any present anxiety, wish to make ample provision against a calamity which, though not anticipated, *might* befall them. Of course, trouble might overtake us, and it does do so in some way or other so far as most of us are concerned; but is God's arm shortened that He cannot deliver us if it His purpose so to do; and is it consistent that we should deliberately encroach on the time which should be devoted to the Lord's service in order to make such provision against the future?

Again, if in order to provide against the future we deprive ourselves of present necessities and so unfit ourselves for carrying on that work to the best of our ability, we are not likely to exhibit faith in the matter of our free will offerings. If we allow these considerations for the future, these "thoughts for the morrow," to weigh unduly with us we are risking the loss of eternity in the Kingdom of God in order to pay an insurance premium on a future which may never mature and which, in any case, will be merely temporal.

Providence, within its proper limits, is no doubt a virtue, and if, without detriment to our first duties, we can lay up for what is wrongly called a "rainy day," so well and good; in this event, however, do not let us forget from whence these blessings come, and that He that hath bestowed can also take away.

"Seek not what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind"—or, as we see from the margin, "Live not in careful suspense." In a word, we have to cultivate an unbending faith and confidence in God, which will in turn beget a wise discretion and will enable us to allocate all temporal considerations and benefits to their relative positions. Says Christ, *"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you."*

And when they are added unto us, how shall we employ them? Well, of course, we have to provide for the necessities of ourselves and of those immediately dependent upon us, whether they be inside or outside the Household of Faith. Also we have to make all possible provision for the work of the Truth. We can speak without fear of offence in this matter, because it is not within the knowledge of any of us as to how our brethren view their responsibilities in this respect; but we cannot help feeling that this item of free-will offering is not regarded by some as it should be, namely, as a definite charge upon income. Otherwise we think the resources of many of the ecclesias for the proclamation of the Truth—generous as they are by comparison with outside denominations—would be greater than they have been hitherto. It cannot be well pleasing to God if we merely offer what little may be left over after all else has been provided for.

We are, of course, not under direct command in this matter, but we are at any rate given a useful example. Under the Mosaic law it was incumbent upon everyone to bring a specified proportion of all their gains, and we do feel that it cannot be gratifying to the Father when Israelites after the Spirit assess their responsibilities in this matter at a lower level than Israel after the flesh were enjoined to do. It is fairly certain that there are many who considerably exceed the Mosaic standard; but what is of prime importance is that the free-will offering, be it what it may, should be the product of a willing and grateful heart, and this will not be possible if we are very much preoccupied with “thoughts of the morrow.”

Having, then, made suitable provision, not only for the needs of ourselves and those dependent upon us but for the work of the Truth, what remains? Well, before laying by for the future, let us take our Bibles down and turn to the latter part of Matthew’s 25th chapter; let us run through that catalogue of good deeds which Christ commended. *“I was an hungred and ye gave me meat. I was thirsty and ye gave me drink. I was a stranger and ye took me in. Naked and ye clothed me. I was sick and ye visited me”* (a visit, by-the-way, for the purpose of spiritual consolation and, if need be, tangible material assistance, not to depress the already overburdened soul with tales of scandal, or the rehearsal of our own real or imaginary calamities).

Then with these words of Christ fresh in our minds, let us expand our thoughts and put to ourselves the question, “Are there, within our knowledge, any in the household of faith suffering from any of these or similar disabilities which Christ enumerates? We shall, alas, very seldom be able to answer in the negative, and if we all do the right things (and it can only be the right thing if it is done at the right time), there will be very few of us remaining who will have much anxiety over our securities or pass-books.

In the process of doing this we shall be rewarded with the knowledge that we are laying up for ourselves treasure in absolute security, *“Where no thief approacheth neither moth corrupteth,”* and in the day when our investments mature we shall find that interest has accumulated at a rate beyond all computation; for we know, on the authority of Christ himself, that it is *“The Father’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom,”* if, amongst other things, we have sufficient faith to endeavour with all our strength to live up to the precepts laid down in these few verses which we have been considering.

—P. L. HONE. *Croydon*. Taken from June/July 1934 Berean

