

11. JESUS NEVER SOUGHT TO RENEW THE WORLD

There are three temptations that are by far the most destructive: the desires for possessions, for pleasure, and for prestige. All have the power to captivate and enslave people. Crime in the world feeds on these three vices: People have been murdered for a few dollars, lives have been ruined for a few minutes of hot lust, families have been sacrificed for the trophies of power and position. Nothing fuels evil intentions like the insatiable quest for possessions, pleasure, or prestige.

In spite of the danger inherent in these pursuits, they are among the most common of all motivations. *I* and *want* are two of the first words a child learns. *I want the toy; I want the pie; I want to be first.* Later these simple imperatives turn into goals for life: *I want a nice car; I want to have fun; I want to be looked up to.*

Each of these three pitfalls is mentioned often in the scriptures. I John 2:15 is a pointed example:

Don't love the world or anything in the world. Whoever loves the world cannot love the Father, because all those things in the world—the desire for pleasure, the desire to give the eyes what they want, and a life of pride and boasting—are not from the Father but from the world. And the world is passing away. It's only the one who does the will of the Father who lives forever.

Each of these temptations form the three-pronged attack Satan used against Christ in the desert. The details of this episode are in Matthew 4:1-11. After days of fasting, Christ was first told he should make bread out of the surrounding stones. The implication was that there was no need for him to be suffering hunger. The appeal was for him to choose pleasure over want. Secondly, he was placed on the top of the temple and told to throw himself down because anyone who is the Son of God is too important to come to harm. This appeal was to his prestige. Finally, he was taken to a high mountain and promised all the kingdoms of the world for his servitude. This appeal was to the desire for possessions.

Jesus declined all of these offerings. In each case, he made it clear to his adversary that obedience to God was of much greater value than anything the world had to offer.

Jesus' life thereafter continued to reflect this attitude. He was the Son of Man who had no place to lay his head. He was the humble shepherd who gave his life for his sheep. He was the man of sorrows who endured sufferings willingly.

Today, traditional Christianity has long departed from Jesus' teachings and examples regarding possessions, pleasure, and prestige. Instead, the prevailing theologies actually promote them and turn them from harmful to holy. The result has been the development over the centuries of thoroughly worldly, wealthy, and prestigious institutional churches. Great cathedrals and fancy church buildings have been built to awe and impress onlookers. Ecclesiastical leaders are given pompous titles, lucrative positions, and reverential treatment. Lavish ceremonies and celebrations showcase the wealth and prestige of Christian institutions. Many respected church members lead lavish lifestyles.

The words and examples of Christ are ignored in this upside-down version of the Kingdom of God, and in their place worldly desires are elevated to virtues. The result is a consumer's caricature of the message of Christ. The institutionalized church has propagated it for centuries. It is the classic example of hypocrisy and of the blind leading the blind. This was Jesus' judgement of what was going on among the Jews in the Israel of the first century and it certainly applies to the so-called Christian cultures of the western world.

It is difficult to understand how the example of Christ can be so widely ignored by those who would claim to be his followers. The most common explanation is that his life was too unique for his example to be applicable to normal human beings. There is some logic to this view, particularly concerning those things that Christ did to prove his unique claims to be God. There are, however, many examples of his behavior and attitudes that are clearly meant to be exemplary for all those who believe in him. A good example is the following passage in the letter that Paul wrote to believers in Philippi:

You should have the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus. Although he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God something that he had to hold on to. Instead he emptied himself by taking the role of a servant, being made to be human like anyone. As a man, he humbled himself by being willing to die ... even the death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

This example of Christ is the opposite of climbing the social ladder. He went down the ladder from God to man; he humbled himself; he identified with the lowly; he was willing to give his life to others even when it meant the ultimate sacrifice. There is nothing about this example that cannot be emulated by anyone who takes Christ seriously.

Down the ladder! Christ climbed down it and his men followed. It's the direction of real life. Here is what Paul said about it in another passage of the letter to the Philippians:

Whatever things were gain to me I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I've suffered the loss of all things for him but consider them to be nothing but rubbish in order that I gain Christ ... (Philippians 3:7-8)

There is great wisdom and great benefit in freeing oneself from the enslaving influence of possessions, pleasure, and prestige. The further one travels down these paths, the more one becomes ensnared in a search that never ends and a craving that can never be satisfied.

The evils mentioned in the scriptures are seldom recognized in society

People are usually unaware of the deep-seated problems caused by men's desire for possessions, pleasure, and prestige. They are never mentioned as the root causes of economic problems, crime, broken homes, waste, abuse, and wars. They never show up in the titles of government workers. There are no commissioners in charge of rooting out greed. There are no civil servants delegated to curb the pursuit of pleasure. There are no officers made responsible for combating outbreaks of prestige. Rather the unabashed pursuit of possessions, pleasure, and prestige are seen as praiseworthy in most societies. Many churches and other Christian institutions join the crowd that cheers people on who strive for any of the three or all of them.

The words of Jesus warn people about the danger of these three temptations. His is a lonely voice, however, and few listen to him. After all, who wants to become poorer? Less comfortable? Less popular or prestigious? Yet these were the directions in which Christ moved. He moved into the milieu of lowly people; he became one who had no permanent abode; he associated with the poor sharing their life and their humility; he even became one who was counted among the criminals.

This does not mean, however, that he avoided the rich or the high and mighty. He moved freely among all kinds of people. He was simply not awed by the wealthy or intimidated by the powerful or influenced by pleasure seekers. For him, these things were like land mines along the path of life, not rewards and blessings as many teachers of traditional Christianity would have their listeners believe.

It's also important to note that Christ never had the goal of making the poor rich, making the insignificant prestigious, or making life easier and more enjoyable for the downtrodden. He simply did not see poverty, insignificance, and a lack of pleasure as great problems as do most people. In his view it's actually when man's desires for

power, possessions, and pleasure become dominant in a culture that the true pestilences of man break out in the form of greed, hate, and decadence which invariably lead to wars and destruction.

Does this mean it is wrong to help the poor, the insignificant, or the downtrodden? Not at all. Jesus helped them in his way which was never a worldly bailout. He helped by being one of them and sharing their lives. His way of helping was different. He never devised programs to eradicate poverty, insignificance, or downtroddenness. Instead, he invited people to become his students: to become rich in wisdom and knowledge, to become significant in the eyes of God, to enter into the joy of the Lord. He didn't call to them to better themselves and come up in the world. Instead he climbed down to where they were and asked them to join him in hungering for the bread of life.

This is one of the main reasons why the great majority of people will never follow the Christ of the first century. Instead, it is common for men to redefine Christ, to create their own versions of him in the garb of one of the gods of old whom men worshiped to attain their own desires. There are many such Christs in the world, but there is only one true Christ and he is the one who was born under the reign of Herod the Great, who lived sacrificially throughout his life, and whose life was the example for his first followers. His life defines forever the truly meaningful life. His life was not dependent upon riches for success; it was not dependent upon prestige for meaning; it was not dependent upon pleasure for fulfillment.

The religious industry

The power behind many traditions can be expressed in the equation *time plus mass acceptance plus profit equals the inertia of tradition*. In other words, the longer a tradition lasts, the greater the number of people who follow it, and the more income it generates, the greater the influence it will have in a population. This triple combination of influences—time, masses, money—helps explain the rootedness of traditions as diverse as baseball's seventh-inning stretch, Halloween, and pilgrimages to Lourdes.

Perhaps the most surprising of these factors is the economic one and the fact that all these traditions get impetus from the business world. In the ballpark it's the concession stands that profit from the seventh inning stretch; with Halloween, it's the industry of candy and costumes; and the Lourdes phenomenon is powerfully promoted by tour groups, airlines, souvenir vendors, and local hoteliers.

All three traditions have become so commonplace among their participants that few are aware of the extent of their involvement. Halloween flies so far under the moral radar of parents that many think nothing of allowing their precious little ones to engage in dark and questionable behavior to celebrate in it. Otherwise sensible parents can be

observed allowing their children to don grisly vampire masks with blood-stained teeth and sending them forth with a trick-or-treat ploy.

The preposterousness of such actions goes unnoticed in the overriding acceptance of the tradition. Even people who find the substance of a holiday like Halloween to be despicable, often participate at least as onlookers simply because they don't want to disappoint anyone or be labeled crotchety.

The more a tradition develops this inertia in a population, the more attractive it becomes to commercial influences. This in turn leads to businesses promoting the tradition which leads to still more inertia which leads to still more commercial involvement. This spiral sucks more and more people into its vortex. It's all a part of the snowball effect of many traditions.

Most people have no idea how traditions get started. It's as true for baseball traditions as it is for religion. They only know that when the seventh inning comes around in a baseball game, the people in the crowd rise to their feet ready to buy a hot dog and sing *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. In the same way when the thirty-first of October comes around a very noticeable portion of the people in America initiate some rather bizarre behavior. The fact that they have no idea why they are doing it is irrelevant. Once the herd instinct clicks in, traditions thrive.

Whatever the reasons for the beginning of a traditional practice, their further growth and propagation can, in most cases, be attributed to economic reasons. Adding human greed to the engine of tradition is what makes the machine really begin to move. Sales people love to hook their hat on a tradition because most of them masquerade as necessities in a culture. Without thinking, people will gladly open their wallets to feed the demands of the tradition. Many Christian traditions fit perfectly into this formula.

The traditions that revolve around the worship service are another source of huge financial outlays such as the construction of sanctuaries and cathedrals, their interior decoration, the manufacture of the instruments, vessels, vestments, and symbols used in the celebration of religious services, and the training and support of millions of professionals whose main purpose is to maintain and implement the superstructures of religious worship. Behind these financially demanding traditions are powerful religious institutions such as denominations, religious schools, and political entities such as the Vatican which keep the wheels of traditional Christianity well-oiled.

The medicine man and wealth

The medicine man of old was one of the first to discover the tempting connection between the gods and wealth. Anyone who had an in with the gods could make a nice living either by promising to influence the divinities or by obtaining information from

them. Ancient temples were the first banks in the world. Great treasures were stored in them and that includes the temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. It is interesting that, even today, many bank buildings are constructed in the classical architecture of the Greek temple. It is no coincidence that many church buildings are built in the same style as well.

In the past generation a great deal has been made of the health-and-wealth gospel which has proved popular in today's world. According to this message, it's God's will for people to be healthy and wealthy. It's interesting that many preachers say it works best when the health-and-wealth seekers make contributions to the preacher's church or organization. The more they contribute—according to the preacher—the healthier and wealthier God will make them. People have been falling for this pitch since the dawn of time.

Religion isn't a moneymaker simply because it makes outrageous promises but also because it can determine the direction to two quite different destinations: the gates of heaven or the pits of hell. The first plays on people's hopes and the second on their fears. Though the hell scenario no longer ignites much fear in our enlightened age, there have been times such as the thousand years of the dark ages when fear was the main producer of income for churches. The profits were made by selling indulgences which were tidy sums of money—determined by the priest—that covered whatever sin it was that might get a person dragged off by Lucifer.

Today, few people have any nightmares about hell. It's the age of entertainment and free time. What people fear more than anything else is to lose their health or the means to a comfortable, entertaining lifestyle. The institutional church, for the most part, has made the adjustment to promote these cultural values, and has attempted to provide their members with a positive message, an entertaining worship experience, and full-service programs that meet every need from child day care to nursing assistance.

Even church buildings are being constructed with ever greater flair to attract people and to satisfy members who value attending structures they can be proud of. This harkens back to the days when great cathedrals were built with towering spires, golden altars, and cavernous ornate interiors. Though they were often built at times of grinding poverty, the extravagant ecclesiastical edifices demonstrated the power and the wealth of the church, and therefore—so the thinking of the time—the glory and greatness of God.

The teachings of Christ and his own personal example stand in stark contrast to the traditional teachings concerning health and wealth. Although there were times when Jesus healed people, fed people, and even plucked a coin out of the mouth of a fish to allow Peter to pay a tax, it was obvious that his purpose and his message had little to do with setting up social and financial programs to benefit his followers. Quite the

contrary: He called them to follow his own example which included a cross at the end of the trail and a life of sacrifice and suffering in the service of God's message. His life was the completely selfless life.

Contrary to the health and wealth preachers, Jesus also did not promise any perfect social or political world in which people could expect all their problems to be solved by an all-caring God. Neither he nor his closest students strove to attain the good life typical of an American suburbanite.

Even though at Jesus' time the political situation was stable—the Pax Romana was an extended time of peace and prosperity in the Mediterranean world—he and his students always saw themselves living in a time of spiritual warfare, a cosmic struggle in which wealth was seen as a temptation that could easily captivate men and distract them from the true issues of life. The scriptures contain ominous words for the rich:

Listen brothers: Hasn't God chosen the poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the Kingdom he's promised to those who love him? But you've insulted the poor. Isn't it the rich who are insulting you? Aren't they the ones who are dragging you into court? Aren't they the ones who are belittling the noble name of him to whom you belong? (James 2:5-7)

Such passages rub a lot of church goers the wrong way. This is one reason why people prefer traditional teachings to scriptural teachings. Whole theologies have been developed over the years in Christianity that sidestep the example of Christ and actually make material success and prosperity a sign of God's blessing. It's an old, old story that every generation repeats in its own way.

There are even those among the religious leadership who feign poverty and sacrifice to achieve materialistic goals. Jesus once confronted the leaders of the Jews about this practice. He said they avoided caring for their parents by giving what they owned to the temple and declaring it God's possession. Therefore they were no longer under any obligation to make any of it available to their mothers or fathers. Because they had access to the temple treasury, however, they were able to once again get their hands on the money.

The scam of feigned poverty has been used over and over by the leaders of traditional Christianity. Monasteries, for example, have been around for hundreds of years. There is nothing in the scriptures that would justify the founding of monasteries with their rigid leadership structure or their ascetic and communal rules of life. Nevertheless, they enjoy the acceptance of most of Christianity and have for centuries. Supposedly, the monks and nuns in such establishments take vows of poverty. They make a very sacrificial picture.

The fact is, however, that monasteries all across the world have often been among the richest and most influential institutions in their areas. Throughout the illiterate ages of Europe when millions of people were impoverished, many monasteries flourished because they were funded and given land by powerful protectors who had an interest in keeping God on their side and the people under their control. The monastic leaders were only too willing to extend their properties and influence. Monasteries often had properties and buildings as rich and majestic as those of their benevolent lords.

Jesus Christ never accumulated worldly wealth like this. Though he had the power and influence to be the richest and most powerful man to ever live, he chose to live as one who “had no place to lay his head.” He did this, however, because it served his purposes and not because he wanted to make a show of it. He didn’t go around dressed in rags either. He simply drew no attention to himself through superficial means.

Work and generosity

Jesus had nothing against working for a living and often used examples in his teachings from the work-a-day world. From what we know he learned a profession and pursued it for the first years of his adult life. During the final years of his life, he was accompanied by friends and family who helped to meet his daily needs. This seems to have been sufficient most of the time, though there are indications that every now and then the need of the moment had to be supplied by leftover grain growing at the edges of the fields.

The point is that regardless of his income, Jesus was completely committed and completely generous, and that always kept him at the low end of the economic scale. This will always be the case with anyone who has much, loves much, and lives with the attitude of Christ. They make available what they have, not out of a desire to impress or receive accolades, but cheerfully out of thankfulness, and to set an example for their family and friends.

The health and wealth preachers often promise rich financial futures for people who give to their ministries. Giving to get, however, is not the motivation behind a follower of Christ. Though there is mention of rewards in the scriptures, they are of the treasures-in-heaven kind. Anyone who knows the reports in scriptures about Jesus and his students knows that the life of Christ never led to any sort of economic betterment for his students or for the country in which they lived. The Kingdom of God could never be built on prestige or possessions or pleasures. These are the temptations offered by the kingdoms of the world.

Those who live for Christ will automatically consider all their resources to be his. They will want to work and strive all the more to be examples of Christ; to live like he did; to make every second count; to live like each day could be their last; to not place their

hope in earthly treasures. They will not be waylaid by the temptations of pleasure, prestige, or possessions. Their chief goal will be to be like their Savior and to please him.