

WORKERS & SHIRKERS

I should speak in very hushed tones today because I want to talk about the worst sin in the world. The Bible calls it a shameful sin, yet, we are so far gone, fallen humanity, that we consider it perfectly respectable. All worldlings cherish this sin and a significant proportion of the church is guilty of this sin. but nobody is ever excommunicated for it but it can and will excommunicate us from heaven.

What sin do I refer to? Look with me at I Corinthians 15 please and observe a verse there, 34, "Come to your right mind and sin no more for some have no knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame." The words are very important. He is saying you sin because you don't know God well enough. He is saying the most shameful thing in the life of any creature is ignorance of the Creator. "Wake up," he says, "come to your senses, you are guilty of a shameful thing; you don't know God." A very learned man by the name of Dr. Williams wrote a book called, GLIMPSES ABROAD surveying humanity and he wrote this, "Even a casual study of religions and the effects of religion in the lives of people makes one fact very evident, namely, that one's conception of God is the one supreme factor in molding his thinking, his conceptions, his conclusions, his ethics (or her), his morals, in fact, every phase of his or her life. Everything depends in the final analysis upon one's conception of God. This is basic, elemental, around it everything revolves." This man is saying what the Bible also says that the way we treat people, type of steward we are, our happiness and everlasting joy or our sadness and everlasting loss springs primarily from the view that we have of God.

A Sunday school teacher once asked a boy in her class, "How do you picture God?" "Oh," he said, "sort of oblong blur." That's the way a lot of people picture God. Someone wrapped in a white sheet, wearing crown, sitting on a throne but apart from that, an oblong blur.

The thing that changes lives is when we learn what God is really like. This is what Romans 2:4 is saying when it says, "The goodness of God leads you to repentance."

Look with me at a verse in Jeremiah 9, a wonderful passage, toward the end of the chapter, verse 23, "Thus says the Lord, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches but let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth for in these things, I delight." Now, we are fairly proud of what we think we know; ignorant of the truth as we enlarge the island of our knowledge, we increase the boundaries of our ignorance because the larger your little island grows, the more it is in contact with the great ocean of reality and knowledge out there. You have heard of the specialist who knows more and more until he knows everything about nothing. There is a sense in which when we increase our knowledge, we increase our awareness of ignorance. So God says don't boast because you think you are wise and don't boast because you have strength, don't boast because of riches for riches take wings, strength does not last and your wisdom is a joke. But if you want to glory, glory in this that you know who I am, that you know what I am, that I am the Creator of heaven and earth and that I delight in these things: punishment? No.

Giving rules and regulations? No. Look at it again, "I practice steadfast love, righteousness, justice, in these things I delight." When Christ came he was God incarnate and his favorite theme was the character of God. When it says that men drew near him, all the Publicans and harlots sought to hear him and the Pharisees murmured saying, "This man receiveth sinners and eats with them." Jesus then told three beautiful stories about the love of God, God is the shepherd who goes after one lost sheep and when he finds it he does not take any risk it is going to be lost again, he carries it home over his heart. It is cold, wet and shivering, he puts it by the warmth of his own bosom. And he says God is like a woman though she has 9 coins left in her wedding jewelry, there is one missing and so until she finds it she seeks. God is like the father who loves the runaway boy and even loves the Pharisaical boy who stays at home. This is Christ's great theme and it is easy to miss it.

Will you look at John 17 please, recall the prayer that Christ gave us the Lord's prayer but he never prayed that one. This is the one that he did pray and I want you to observe, please, verse 23: "I in them and thou in me that they may become perfectly one, that the world may know that you sent me and hast loved them even as you have loved me." Look at how it closes, "I made known to them thy name and I will make it known that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them and I in them." Think of the height, depth, length and breadth of this. The world needs to know that you love believers as much as you love me and the one thing, Father, that you and I are working for is that these believers will reveal you to the world showing the same sort of love to other people as you have, the love wherewith you have loved me may be in them. A tremend-

ous concept.

Now come to what Roy read this morning. Come back to Matthew 25 (I could almost see everyone flinch when he read this story). You may remember on a recent study of the parables I pointed out that the parables reveal the cross because there are many passages that are melting in their revelation in generous mercy and love. He forgives the man who owes 10,000 talents, my, that would take milleniums to pay off and then there is all the interest. There would be no way of dealing with it but God's love is so big he can forgive someone with an unpayable debt...10,000 talents. He welcomes the Publican who says, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." God is so gracious according to many of the parables, the Good Shepherd, the woman looking for the coin, the forgiving father, the king that forgives the great debtor, story after story talks about love. But story after story he talks about severity. And that is why we flinched this morning when it spoke about the gritting of teeth and the outer darkness and he that hath not, from him will be taken even that which he seems to have. But, you see, these are two great things we need to know about God. God is just, God is holy. The Bible mentions holiness over 600 times; it mentions his wrath over 600 times. His wrath does not mean emotional flaring up as it does with us. The wrath of God is just the inevitable recoil of his holiness against anything that is destructive, anything that would destroy. That is the wrath of God but there is emphasis in the Bible on God's holiness and his wrath because the only thing that can endure in this universe is what is like God...the only thing that can endure is what is like God. The world passes away and the lust thereof but he that doeth the will of God shall abide forever. Originally,

everything in nature was a revelation of God. Now it reveals the corruptor as well as the Creator. But originally everything in nature talked about God. The sun told of his generous bounty. The gentle rain, what would it be like if the rain came down like oranges--the gentleness of rain, the gentleness of the mist and the most powerful in nature are so quiet. What if the rising of the sun was like a fusillade of cannons. Millions of people would not like that. But the most powerful things in nature are very gentle...gravity, light, gentleness, tenderness. Everything in nature said something about our Creator, the flowers, the birds, the flavours, fragrances, friendship. The more intimate you get in life, the more you see the heart of God. Marriage itself was meant to be a mirror of the relationship between God and his creatures. Marriage, at its best is but a tiny gleam of the glory of the relationship between every believer and God. But, now, in this story you will notice verse 24, the man with one talent (about 1000 of a specialty back there financially) said, "Master, I knew you would be a hard man reaping where you didn't sow and gathering when you did not winnow, so I was afraid." The reason for this man's fear and the reason for his negativity and the reason for his failure, the reason he is not productive and the reason for his eternal loss is that he does not know God. He had a wrong picture of God. You know, the Scriptures say that those that make idols are like them and one of the most severe rebukes in the Bible is, "You thought I was altogether such a one as thyself." That's a pretty strong comment. So this man's fear and failure grew out of his misconception of God. And I would put it to you that I fail and my problems grow out of the same thing. None of us know God as intimately, as fully, as broadly, as deeply as it is our privilege

to know him. How can we? We are so preoccupied with so many things. And, poor God, is marginalized. God is put out on the perimeter and, yet, if he exists, he is the one great circumstance. He's the heart, the throb, the pulse of everything but we don't treat Him that way, we marginalize God, put him out there, maybe a little bit for conscience's sake in the morning or a little push and go to sleep on at night. God, I am a busy man, or a busy woman. But this man's fears and his non-productivity, his failure in life grew out of his misconception of God. He had misunderstood everything.

Can I remind you of a verse in the previous chapter? Please observe in the previous chapter the Lord says to them in verse 42, "Watch therefore, you do not know what day your Lord is coming." Then, in verse 45 he talks about service who then is the faithful and wise servant. So the close of this prophetic section of the second advent sermon, the Lord talks about watching and working...watching, being awake for the second coming and working while we wait, occupied until I come. Make the world better for the fact that you have lived here. So then he tells about two stories, one about watching and one about working. The story of the virgins is about watching which does not mean having you binoculars out but being awake, being alert, staying ready. As soon as you believe in Jesus you are ready but you must stay ready. So the story about the virgins was about watching.

This next story is about working. We are all stewards. The only reason we are here is to become like God and to minister like God. So service is ministry. We are here to convey God to the world and this man did not understand this privilege. It is seen clearly.

in the predecessors that what they were clearly doing is working for themselves when they worked for the Master. Because what happened when he came? "Well done. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord," and he gets double of what he had invested; first man, second man, same story, Well done, you have been faithful and you will get double of what he has invested. So, those men while working for their master were working for themselves. And isn't this true in the Christian life. When God whispers to you and me, "Look, going your own way won't get you anywhere, being selfish won't get you anywhere, living the way worldlings live--self indulgence, won't get you anywhere. Sin does not work. Sin is folly, sin is suicide. When God tells us to change our ways it does not add anything to him, it adds a lot to me. Because sin is suicide, the way of God is the way of life; the tree of righteousness...life to all who will take hold of her. So everything that God tells me is for my benefit. These servants were working for themselves, not just for the master. This third servant does not realize that. He had such a wrong view of God, he paralyzed. Fear paralyzes. There is a type of fear that is right. We should fear sin. We should fear lest we fall short of our privileges and obligations. That is a fear that is legitimate but there are many fears that are not legitimate. Most of our fears are not in that legal category. Most of our fears are that we think that the world will do us in. Most of our fears are that something is going to spring on us like a lion in the dark taking its prey. Those fears are commonplace with all of humanity and they grow out of the fact that they are not sure that God is going to care for us. We are not certain that God cares about this problem that I have--financial, physical, family, reputation, employment. Because we doubt the

goodness of God, we fear. The more we come to believe in the goodness of God, the less we will fear.

One of the greatest psychologists of the 20th century, Jung, said that at least a third of the people that came to him had no definable clinical problem. He said they were afraid of life. Do we have an excuse to be afraid of life? We open our eyes in the morning-- anything could have happened to us while we were unconscious, someone could have jumped through the window and dispatched us. Most of us survived a lot of those dark nights without any real problem. Even when we could not defend ourselves we have been kept and what greets us? The rising of the sun, breakfast, someone we love, clothing to put on if it is cold, the fire if we need it. There are so many things in nature trying to say that God is for you, not against you. And if we disbelieve the record, we will be filled with fear.

When Christ made the character of God the main subject in his instructions, he was trying to say, "Fear not, my peace I give unto you, let not your hearts be troubled; in the world there will be sorrow and tribulation. It is for your good, believe me, the hard things are for your good. They are not meant to destroy you." Michelangelo was once working on a huge block of stone and someone said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I am letting the angel out," as he carved on that stone and hammered on that stone and chisled on that stone. God is a Michelangelo. You and I are stones in the rough. We take a lot of chisling, a lot of hammering. Michelangelodid not intend to destroy it, he wanted to let the angel out. But our tendency^{is} to think when we are chisled, boy, one more blow and I'm gone, can't take this anymore.

It's natural for us to be filled with these fears because we are not sure enough that God is for us. Surely, the gentleness of Christ to people--he could say, "In heaven the angels of these children behold the face of your Father and it is not your Father's will that one of these should perish." He is talking about the sacredness of life, the sacredness of the weakest of life, the sacredness of the most ignorant of life and it is not your Father's will that one should perish. Of course, it is at the cross where we have the supreme revelation of God and all those things that happened in Genesis because Eve had a false view of God (given to her by the devil) all the things that result from that reappear at the cross. The Devil had come and said, "God does not really love you; he is holding something back from you because that tree would really advantage you. He just doesn't want you to be up on a high level." Because of the wrong view of God, sin opened its gates. All of pain, all of suffering, all of sorrow came because our first parents believed a scandal about God that had no foundation. And then in the result come thorns, curse, suffering, sweat, nakedness and all of these things that come there in Genesis reappear at Calvary; He wears the crown of thorns, in Gethsemane he began to sweat great drops of blood. Now we see him preexcellence as the man of sorrows, he is made a curse for us. The death that came in Eden, he endured Everything that is pictured in Genesis 3 as the result of men believing the lie about God reappears at Calvary. We said many times that Christianity/in the world with a wounded God. What more could God do to convince us that he loves us, to make himself apparently helpless, shame to be endured, despising the shame, what more could he have done? And the tenderness on the cross:

"Woman, behold your son." He cried for his mother. "Son, behold your mother." He provides for his beloved disciple too. Christ had been everything to John. Now there is going to be a great lacuna. Jesus' mother has a great heart, "Woman, behold your son," care for John. John, you care for Mary. His attitude to the thief. So here is the crowning revelation of the love of God.

A little child in an orphanage who had had no Christian background was present at a Christmas program and the visiting minister winsomely and wisely gave the meaning of Bethlehem. And when it was over this little orphan who had never heard the story before, turned to a nurse in the orphanage, who unlike most nurses, had a rather discouraging countenance and a very strict way of carrying herself and rather discouraging to the little children, the little boy looked up at her and said, "Have you ever heard that story before?" She said, "I've heard it lots of times." He said, "You certainly don't look like it." And it may be that none of us fully look like it or act like it. When we learn about God the challenge is this is the way you ought to be. He loves mercy, he love righteousness, all of his laws just reflect what he is. He is against adultery because he is the pure one. He is against hatred because he is the loving one. He is against taking life because he is the giver of life. Do we look like it?

Long ago, the famous portrait of Dante done by Bargello was lost. So a young artist was determined to try and find it. He investigated all the traditions and the one which seemed most likely to him was a certain tenament there in Italy was probably the place where the painting of the great poet was done. So he went to the room

where tradition said that the painting had taken place but it was filled with lumber, sawdust, rubbish and all the walls were white-washed. So he began by taking out the lumber and he took off all the whitewash and to his joy and surprise underneath color began to appear and soon the lost piece and the noble face of the ancient poet, Dante, was there. People had not appreciated the face. It had not been destroyed, it had just been littered up. And I would suggest to you that the trouble in the world today is not that God isn't here, but God's face is obscured. We have said many times that the trouble with TV is not just the murders and the impurity, the trouble is the practice of the absence of God. That's the worst thing about television. You can watch TV all day and all night and think there is no such being as God unless you are tuned into a religious program...which is rare. The challenge for you and me in the daily life that we live is not to let the white-wash, the rubbish, the litter, obscure the face of God. For that face is more wonderful, more joyous, more loving and more merciful than anything we could imagine.

The great Baptist preacher, F. W. Borham (?) said, "If I had my ministry all over," and he administered for 70 years, dying in his 90s, "I would talk more about God." He meant here that he would talk about God's omnipotence, God's omniscience and God's omnipresence, often misunderstood. What do we mean by the omnipresence of God? Does it mean that God is spread out thin? No. It means that God is fully present in every place that is the meaning of the omnipresence of God. God is fully present in every place. He is just as present here as though he is not present anywhere--that's omnipresent. His omnipotence is misunderstood. Omnipotent,

we say it means that God can do anything. Well, that is true in a sense but it is not true in the absolute sense. The Bible says it is impossible for God to lie. So there are some things impossible to God. Whatever is contrary to the character of God is impossible for him. So when we talk about the omnipotence of God it is very important in our prayer life.

We are going to talk about the reason for unanswered prayer in an upcoming congress, Lord willing. Some of the prayers for which we ask demand the omnipotence of God but not his omniscience. You see the difference, don't you? Omnipotence means he can do anything, we think, in reality, not anything contrary to his nature. Omniscience means he knows everything. When you and I expect every prayer that we pray to be answered, "yes," we are demanding the omnipotence of God--but Lord don't turn your omniscience on. If you turn your omniscience on we might see that this which we are requesting would do us harm in the long run. Because, you know, if I could pray and be sure of always getting the answer I want, I'd never be short of money, time, short of health, the only thing I would be short of would be trouble. And would that improve Des Ford? No, not at all. It would ruin him. You and I need some difficult places. We need to be chisled, we need to be hammered.

I will take you back to where we began. The Lord said, and he also said it to church goers, "Awake to righteousness and sin not. I speak to your shame. Some have not the knowledge of God." The greatest sin of any of us and the source of every other sin is our ignorance of the glorious truths about our heavenly Father who in the person of his Son came down to demonstrate an infinite

love. Spreading his arms in invitation and says, in effect, "Come, and I will receive you."

PRAYER: Lord, teach us about yourself and as we look at Scripture may our chief attention be given to the incarnation of heaven's best, to the revelation of Jesus of that infinite mercy and goodness which is God. Help us to see it, help us to believe it, help us to reflect it. Amen.