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The Seed and the Plough

When Jesus calls us to follow Him, the call embraces everything. The great commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Often people assume that if they were to obey this command they would become religious fanatics, but fanaticism does not touch the essence of Christianity.

What makes a fanatic a fanatic? First of all an idea, an ambition, an extreme enthusiasm of any kind might qualify one as fanatical. But it is not just enthusiasm. It is when the extreme desire dominates the personality to such a point that every other aspect of human life goes unnoticed, ignored, or neglected that fanaticism enters.

This is especially true of religious fanatics. The zealous soul eclipses its broad vision for the sake of a singular narrow devotion. And so in the midst of all that truly exists, the religious fanatic sees nothing else but that one element that he chooses to see.

There are, of course, other forms of fanaticism besides the religious. The materialist is an example, seeing reality only through scientific terms that have to do with matter, or whatever might be thought to be matter. The materialist reduces life to biology or to chemistry or to physics. Thought is only the brain; love is only sentiment. There is no spiritual reality, no truth to beauty, and no substance to charity.

In our present culture, there is yet another more subtle form of fanaticism. It is the kind that may arise with affluence and opportunity. In this form, the abundant life is associated with the choices of one's leisure, and such choices are confined to pleasure and entertainment.

This point of view assumes that the results of labor and success find their most proper expression in self-indulgence. After all it is one's right; we earned it. But virtue, duty, and sacrifice fall outside this perspective, because they are assumed to impede the freedom of one's affluence. Virtue, duty, and sacrifice are the stuff of work, not pleasure.

Fanatical affluence is subtle. It offers a seemingly infinite abundance of goods - a taste of this, a sight of that, a new and untried experience. None of these abundant goods is bad in and of itself. Yet none of these is particularly healthful either. All are in fact potentially addictive and deadening to the soul. A philosophy professor of mine once asked this simple question about the value of soap operas on television. "Is one

to suppose that the soul is made for that?"

Jesus speaks clearly about the subtle and potential danger of affluence. It may become, and in our culture often is, the thorns that choke the Word of the Kingdom. In the parable of the Sower and the Seed, the seed that falls among thorns hears the Word. "And the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the Word, and it becometh unfruitful." The good fruit of the seed of the Word is there indeed potentially. But with the seed, in the duplicitous and deceived soul, thorns in the forms of worldliness grow up, even things good in themselves. And because these worldly goods are treated as the supreme object of the soul's desire, they dominate time and energy and mind, choking the soul and leaving it barren.

Our Lord speaks of another image that warns against the barrenness of the soul. It is the saying about the plough. "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." God's realm requires steady focus and unwavering commitment. One must not look back to worldliness because the worldly heart does not desire God. If one does glance backward, the plough goes misdirected, and the whole endeavor to plough the fields of the soul is lost.

The kingdom of God demands the comprehensive focus of a good heart. The seed of the Word has within it the capacity to produce good fruit. Likewise the plough must be steady, and diligent. Apart from these, the subtle influence of the world chokes out life and wreaks havoc.

What Jesus seeks in our following Him is not fanaticism but a new life that takes up all that we are and makes of us a glorious new creation. The Christian life, then, is not one new aspect among many, which dominates and distorts all others. Rather, it is the new life that weaves our many aspects into one. While fanaticism excludes the rest of life for one thing, Christian discipleship includes everything in life for the sake of God.

Virtue, duty, and sacrifice turn out not to be identified with unwanted labor, but with the opportunities for good will and Christian charity. The seed that is sown grows more completely and becomes productive when the pleasures of the soul are not mere self-indulgence, but a free offering to God, and not to God only, but to God through the love of neighbor as well. With this attitude of soul, affluence ceases to be dangerous and instead becomes the stewardship of God's bounty.

Our lives, then, are given a period of graceful time to serve Him in our generation. And while the pleasures of a free and affluent society are certainly to be used and enjoyed, there remains the various ways of duty and sacrifice in which we are called to spend our souls for the common good of our family, and of our city, and of our church. All these are pleasing when done for the sake of the Lord.

When pleasure becomes more than pleasing self, and is intent on pleasing God, the hand set to the plough takes delight in the focus of the mind. The whole of life, every moment of everyday, becomes not a mere experience without the meaning, but a breathing and living substance in which every aspect of life is saturated with divine goodness and mercy. To live as a Christian means to live in the full

awareness that not even a sparrow falls without the knowledge of God, and that all things are measured by eternity. And the love of the eternal God and of our neighbor, for His sake, are true and everlasting pleasure.

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