

## SPECIAL STUDY

## MONEY AND MARRIAGE: MANACLES OF THE MUNDANE?

Modern apostles of the single life and semi-bohemian pushers of poverty even in the Church of Jesus Christ are making their voices heard to justify their less conventional life-styles. While each one must decide how best to react to the station in life in which he has been called by God, the disciples of Jesus Christ must see the options clearly, not being misled by popular talk that at times sounds like something straight out of the Gospels.

In our present sections we have examined Jesus' reference to those who would be natural and proper exceptions to marriage: "the eunuchs for the Kingdom of God," those who remain virgins in order to pursue specific goals for the advancement of God's rule. Further, we heard Jesus urge the rich young ruler to distribute his wealth among the poor to be "perfect." Now, if celibacy is to be received by those rare souls to whom it is given, and if voluntary poverty is required to be perfect, then a life-style that reflects these characteristics most nearly would have an intrinsic superiority over the married person who possesses property, would it not? And would not the freedom from these manacles permit a higher spirituality?

It is to Bruce (*Training*, 245-254) that we are indebted for the following salient points that analyze this problem:

ASCETICISM, AS A THEORY OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE,  
IS FALSE FOR THESE REASONS:

I. IT IS BASED ON A FALSE ASSUMPTION.

- A. Asceticism assumes that abstinence from lawful things is intrinsically a virtue superior to moderation in using them.
- B. This assumption is false:
  - 1. Because abstinence is actually the virtue of the weak, because it is the safer way for anyone given to an uncontrollable love of a thing. Abstinence gains this safety at the expense of that disciple that develops character and strength. A self-controlled moderation is the virtue of the strong. (Cf. Ro. 14:1—15:7)

2. Because abstinence is inferior to moderation for its psychological sanity.
  - a. Asceticism tends to exaggerate the evil of the things avoided, developing a morbidness about contamination and a deliberate distortion of reality to justify its abstinences.
  - b. Abstinence, while necessary in special circumstances, is really unnatural and inhuman, a forced withdrawal from what God created to be received with thanksgiving. (1 Ti. 4:3-5)
3. Asceticism is surprisingly inferior to moderation even in the element that constitutes its character: self-denial.
  - a. To eliminate at the outset everything that could ever be a source of human joy so that it could never be a temptation sounds very impressive.
  - b. But to live with and fully use everything that could always be a temptation, while, at the same time, maintaining one's own spiritual freedom untrammelled is real spiritual power and character. This self-sacrifice is actually the greater, because it is ready to move, not from the sterile wilderness of empty asceticism, but from the midst of life's dearest enjoyments, and not merely once for all, but many times and at any time. These, not the ascetics, are the greater heroes.

## II. THE ASCETIC THEORY IS BASED ON ERRONEOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRIST'S WORDS

- A. Jesus does not state or even suggest that the single life and total self-privation of goods are essentially superior to marriage and proprietorship rightly understood and used.
- B. He teaches, rather, that, under special circumstances, the unmarried or the penniless condition offered certain advantages which facilitate a single-minded pursuing the interest of the Kingdom.
  1. Danger and hard times underline this advantage most clearly.
  2. But this forced unnaturalness is a real hindrance in the absence of such crises. (See notes on Paul's view of celibacy at Mt. 19:11.)
- C. The Christian ideal is consuming devotion to the Kingdom, regardless of what it costs or when it costs, so that everything

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else is placed subordinate to it.

1. It is this sense in which all of Jesus' demands of self-sacrifice must be interpreted.
2. Any "overtime duty" is not asceticism for its own sake, but "extraordinary demands in usual emergencies" to get a job done.

D. The reader is referred to the notes on 19:3-12 and 19:16—20:16.

### III. OPTIONAL ASCETICISM AS AN IDEAL OF VIRTUE IS A LOGICAL CONTRADICTION:

A. If asceticism or abstinence be a virtue essentially and unavoidably superior to moderation and self-control in the use of lawful things, then with what logic can asceticism be thought of as optional?

1. If godliness and perfection are inexorably linked only to poverty or celibacy, then to arrive at perfect godliness there can be no thought of free options.

a. Are we really free to choose whether we will be a "perfect" Christian as opposed to a more common "good" Christian?

b. May we be excused from developing a given character quality merely because it is too demanding, if it be really true that that very virtue is essential to a supposedly superior Christianity?

c. In short, if it is a virtue, it is required: if it is optional, it is not a virtue!

B. Were asceticism a virtue, then Jesus made a mistake not to command literal poverty and enforced celibacy for everyone. But that He did not, in fact, do so is everywhere evident in Scripture where Apostles continue to hold out perfection for everyone regardless of the condition he was in when he was called to be a Christian.

C. Ascetic poverty necessitates, for its continued existence, that the "superior ascetics" depend upon those "inferior Christians" who still possess enough capital to support the mendicant ascetics also, or worse, it must depend upon charity from non-Christians, or else, by personal industry, compromise its absolute poverty enough to possess the tools necessary for gaining its own living.

IV. ASCETICISM, AS A THEORY OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE, IS ABSURD, BECAUSE IT ENTAILS THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE HUMAN COMMUNITY.

A. Even if family and possessions are not everything, man's earthly life is profoundly concerned with both.

1. Enforced celibacy leads to disintegration of the Christian ideal.

a. Because celibates who remain faithful to Christ and their ascetic ideal are themselves but one generation from extinction or must resort to adoption of others' children to keep the community going. (Cf. the Essenes' approach to this problem.)

b. Because celibates who abandon their virginity but remain celibates, leave also their virtue and sink into a degeneracy and corruption through sensuality that destroys everything for which they had become ascetics in the first place.

2. Enforced poverty lasts until the end of the groceries in the larder, then it falls into the logical contradiction of depending upon those of "inferior" virtue to sustain it either by charity or commerce.

B. Service to God and human life lived to the full are not mutually exclusive. Rather, it is in the crucible of true humanness that God's original design for man is to be perfected, where every relationship, every natural ability, every desire, every earthly possession is to be turned to usefulness in Christ's service and made to contribute to our maturity in the character of Christ. We must live in the earthly condition in which God has called us, resisting its temptations and overcoming by His grace. We must mingle in the world's crowd, expose ourselves to its temptations, venture within the magic circle of its attractions, but show by the power of Christ at work in us that we are men of another world, hence superior to this world's allurements. We must dispassionately compare this world's pleasures and prizes with those God offers, and prefer these latter out of genuine conviction of their surpassing worth. (Cf. *P.H.C.*, XXIII, 366)

CONCLUSION: Christ's stern words on marriage and possessions, poverty and celibacy anyone with family responsibilities or preoccupied

with wealth. Then, shaken by his own vulnerability, he can turn to God for power to do the difficult, not impossible, task of concerning himself single-mindedly with the things of the Lord, as if he were unmarried, although he is married, and although responsible for many possessions, he may be free from the love of money, rich in heavenly treasures, humble-minded and generously devoted to Christ's service.

## CHAPTER TWENTY OUTLINES

- Section 50. Jesus Tells Parable of Eleventh Hour Laborers (20:1-16)  
 Section 51. Jesus Predicts His Passion a Fourth Time (20:17-19)  
 Section 52. Jesus Refuses to Establish a Hierarchy (20:20-28)  
 Section 53. Jesus Heals Two Blind Men at Jericho (20:29-34)

## STUDY OUTLINES

(Theme continued from Chapter 19: "THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS")

### IV. GOD-MAN RELATIONSHIPS Illustrated by the Parable of the Eleventh-Hour Laborers (20:1-16)

- A. Parable of householder hiring workmen to work in his vineyard.
1. Having been hired at various hours of the day, they expect varying wages.
  2. He orders them all paid the same amount, beginning with the last laborers hired.
  3. Those who worked all day complain that the last were made equal to them in pay.
  4. Householder answers:
    - a. "I am doing you no wrong, because you received all the pay you bargained for."
    - b. "I can do what I want to with my own possessions. What is that to you?"
    - c. "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (Everything depends upon the free will and mercifulness of God.)