

BLOOD, BREAD AND FIRE

The Christian's Threefold Experience

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

PLAYING IN THE MARKET-PLACE

But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented (Matthew 11:16-17).

As the context shows, our Lord had in mind His own childish generation and the Pharisees in particular. John the Baptist had come, wild, austere, ascetic, a stern and awful prophet of the wilderness, thundering divine judgments and calling to repentance. They did not like him. Then the Lord Jesus had come, sociable, friendly, easy to approach, eating with publicans and sinners. They did not like Him either. They called John a demoniac and Jesus a glutton. They were like spoiled children.

We still have such children in the marketplaces, plenty of them in the churches. They have been petted and pampered until no kind of preaching suits them. If the wrath of God is proclaimed, the preacher is too severe; if love is preached, the minister is too sentimental. Thousands of church people would go home highly offended were either John the Baptist or Jesus the Christ to occupy the pulpit next Sunday.

We have encountered these children of the marketplace many times in our ministry. If we spoke in a low tone we were dull; if we spoke in a loud tone, we were deafening. If we stood still they pronounced us statues; if we stirred about, we were labeled sensationalists. We were much distressed until we learned to identify and classify these babes of the marketplace.

But I am particularly concerned with the fact that our Lord speaks of His generation as children playing in the markets. First they piped; they played wedding. Then they mourned; they played funeral. First they rejoiced, and then they wept. It looked real enough, but it was only make-believe. They did not mean it; they were only children playing in the marketplace.

The human race in general today is only playing at life. A hurried, feverish generation gulps down its breakfast, bolts to the office and shop, races home through crazy traffic, reads the comic sheets, tunes in on a radio comedian, takes an aspirin tablet, and calls it a day. A superficial multitude of sheep without a shepherd, dabbling in a thousand things, tries to talk learnedly on many matters but only exposes a pitiful ignorance of all.

Compare the poetry of today with the bards of old, modern music with the old masters, modern politicians who only run for things with the old statesmen who stood for things, and you behold a nation of manikins, dummies, Punch-and-Judy shows. For we are only children playing in the marketplace, just pretending to live, acting parts in a silly comedy that turns out to be a tragedy, just trying to pose our way through a dramatized version of ourselves.

But we turn to the professing church to discover, alas, even as our Lord found it among the Pharisees, multitudes of children just playing at religion.

First, they are children: not childlike as our Lord would have us be (Matthew 18:3) but childish. There are babes who ought to be grown, milk-feeders who should long ago have reached a meat diet, still carnal and proclaiming it as the Scriptures reveal by envying and strife and divisions, walking as men, saying, **“I am of Paul,”** and **“I am of Apollos”** (I Corinthians 3: 3-4).

Christians who ought to be teachers must themselves be taught first principles and **“are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil”** (Hebrews 5: 12-14).

Newborn Christians are indeed to desire the sincere milk of the Word that they may grow thereby (I Peter 2:2) and must be nurtured with greatest patience. But the problem of many a pastor and church is these children who will not grow up, spoiled, pouting, selfish, grumbling, overgrown babies of the marketplace who will not be moved by any preacher, to whom even John the Baptist would be a demoniac and the Lord a glutton.

Then they were children in the marketplace. Many childish Christians play at religion because they live in the marketplace; they are at home in this world. They live to buy and sell, to get and to gain, their minds are taken up with profit and loss, laying up treasure on earth and not in heaven. Where their treasure is their heart is also, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word, and they become unfruitful.

As it was in the days of Noah and of Lot, so it is today; millions who name the name of Christ are more at home in the marketplace than at the house of God, more satisfied in the shop than in the sanctuary. No wonder they only play at religion; no wonder their piety is but a hollow mockery; no wonder with their mouth they show much love but their heart goeth after their covetousness!

“They say they are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing and know not that they are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”

But in Jesus’ day, the marketplace was not only a place of buying and selling: it was the public square where the people met to gossip and hear the news and pass the time away. Here again the make-believe Christians of this present age have assembled.

Call it by any modern name: whether golf course, or ocean beach, or swimming-pool, or bridge club, or secret lodge, or theater, or house party, or wherever the children of this generation gather, there you will find make-believe Christians wasting instead of redeeming the time, frittering away the last precious hours of this dark age while the clock of God's Word ticks away relentlessly and the hands on the dial move close to midnight.

Is it any wonder that such poor souls sit listlessly at church on Sunday morning, having ears but hearing not, having eyes but seeing not, having hearts but feeling not? For their minds are still out in the marketplace and the public square where this poor, silly generation chatters away in a strife of tongues about the newest styles and the latest pictures and the freshest scandal. No man can be serious about the gospel and loiter in the emporium of this present age. His heart cannot blaze for God if he warms his heels by the enemy's fire in the courtyards of this passing world.

So these childish Christians play at religion. They join the church; they go to church; they work in the church, but they are only playing; it is not their life.

Just as these children of our Lord's time piped and mourned, played wedding and funeral, so these make-believe Christians pretend first to rejoice and then to weep. They sing with gusto:

Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Saviour am happy and blest.
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long.

But they are neither submitted, happy, nor at rest, and as far as praising the Saviour all the day long is concerned, when did they ever do that?

They turn around with equal ease to play funeral and to mourn. Their eyes well with tears at a sad story; they shake their heads soberly when the seriousness of the times is pictured, but it is only a pantomime; they go on living as they have always lived, pitying the victim by the wayside, but, like the Levite, passing by on the other side.

Even we orthodox and Bible-taught fundamentalists had better examine ourselves here. There is no sin more common, more deceptive, more disastrous, than the iniquity of pious make-believe. Indeed we can become so proficient at pretending that we deceive ourselves.

The actor seems real enough on the stage. If he is a good actor, he can so live the part that it is almost impossible to disentangle him from what he is portraying. He can so enter into the character of his subject, can so assume his peculiarities and manners, that he becomes identified with him. But when the show is over, the actor goes out the door himself, another man, leaving the character behind him. He is somebody else, you see, and he was only playing.

So, there is an imitation of Christ that is only a dramatic exhibition.

It may repeat the holy phrases and recite His blessed word. It may assume His characteristics and practice His virtues until the face takes on a saintly look and the behavior becomes impressively other-worldly. Yet, for all that, it may be but the hollow pretense of those who call Him Lord, Lord, and do not what He commands.

It is an old story and well worn, of the minister who asked Macready, the actor, “Why do you draw out crowds to see you act while no one comes to hear me preach?” and he received the answer, “I act my fiction as though it were fact; you preach your facts as though they were fiction!” Nowhere is it easier to play with the gospel than in the ministry. With a pleasing personality, a gift of eloquence, a fine moral character, and plenty of business sense, one can take the gospel for a football and make a great many goals. But preaching is no game, and woe unto him who plays at it, whether he pipe or whether he mourn!

We remember David Hume’s going to hear a very poor, plain preacher, and when asked why he attended such preaching when he did not believe it, answering: “I don’t believe what he says, but he believes it, and once in a while I like to hear a man who believes what he says!” Our sinful generation sits unmoved today Sunday after Sunday before tasteless, dry, and powerless preaching because too often the minister himself is only reciting phrases that never have gripped him, just acting a part, an actor in a pulpit show.

God awaken us today to the awful sin of pious unreality! Just as we handle our coins and rarely examine them to see what is stamped thereon, so we handle the precious truths of the gospel and bandy about the spiritual coinage of our faith without stopping really to get acquainted with it and learn whose image and superscription are thereon. The holiness of God . . . we have heard of that all our lives, but have we ever fallen before Him broken and undone, crying, “**Woe is me . . . My comeliness is turned to corruption. . . . I am a sinful man, O Lord**”?

The awfulness of sin . . . we have dressed that nowadays in language of psychology; we have healed slightly our hurt and spread cold cream on cancer and blamed our evils on ancestors and environment. Sin is inhibited pleasure, arrested or incomplete development, biological growing-pains. We no longer weep for our transgression, because sin, as men now see it, is no longer anything to cry about. It is a plaything of the marketplace.

The certainty of judgment . . . who takes that seriously nowadays?

“**The wrath of God,**” “**the terror of the Lord,**” “**the lake of fire,**” . . . alas, hell has become the favorite byword of those who gather in the public square! Who shudders today to think of falling stars and burning worlds and multitudes at the great white throne when the books are opened? Who shrinks today from the horror of the undying worm and the fire unquenchable?

Calvary . . . we sing about it, pay it tribute, but has the glory of Golgotha ever gripped our souls? Was it really at the cross, at the cross, where we first saw the light, and the burden of our hearts rolled away? Was it there by faith we received our sight, and now are we happy all the day? The joy of salvation, the good cheer of sins forgiven — is it real or did we join a church on decision day with no sense of guilt removed, no experience of pardoning mercy?

Spurgeon said, "He who has stood before God convicted and condemned with the rope around his neck . . . is the man to weep with joy when he is pardoned and to live to the honor of his Redeemer by Whose blood he was cleansed." Was it grace that taught our hearts to fear and did grace our fears relieve? And just how precious did that grace appear the hour we first believed? Is the joy of the Lord our strength or do we merely pipe in the marketplace?

The fire of Pentecost, the filling of the Spirit . . . how many today drunk on new wine, are beside themselves, are fools for Christ's sake? Is the holy flame real enough that we have become burning and shining lights, consumed with zeal for the house of God?

And what shall we say of the fellowship of the saints, the love of the brethren, which assures us that we have passed from death to life? The delights of the Word, the joy of service, the blessed hope of the Lord's return . . . we are ready, you say? Yes, but are we expectant? How many of us have that hilarious abandon as pilgrims and strangers, citizens of heaven, joint-heirs with Christ, seeking a city to come? No wonder the early Christians shook the world. They did not play with the gospel; they took it seriously, and neither did they play with anything else. They really went to war; they did not stage a dress-parade with flag-wavings and drum-beatings and rattling of wooden swords. They endured hardness as good soldiers and did not entangle themselves with the affairs of this world. They were no children of the marketplace just playing at religion in the courtyards of the age.

We live in an artificial day when the whole world has been turned into a public square. The auto and the radio have run us out of our last solitudes. The family cannot stay together long enough for prayer. Even the church has forgotten how to worship, and the hucksters of the market have been called in to run the business of God.

We cannot escape the marketplace today, but while we are in the world we need not be of it. If we must move in the public square, let us not go there as children to play. It is no easy thing to be a genuine Christian and take the gospel seriously before this unbelieving modern world. But if we are ever to glorify our God, we must learn that being a Christian is a life and not a play. We are not actors to imitate our Lord. The actor can impersonate his subject but he can never exchange his personality for the character he portrays. Here, however, we thank God that the analogy breaks down, for the believer may die to self, lose his own life, decrease that Christ may increase. Glorious reality that Christ lives again in His saints, who are not puppets on a stage but en-Christed souls who can exchange their lives for His and say, "**For to me to live is Christ**"; "**Christ liveth in me.**" It is not imitation but identification and He will live again in any soul who will receive Him, yield to Him, trust and obey. He would not have us childish pretenders playing in the marketplace. He would have us be converted and become as little children, genuine and true. God grant you may not be childish but child-like, Christ living in you.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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