

“Living in the World and Not Being ‘On The Take’”

Luke 3:10-18

2/4/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Professor Leo Curran, of the University of Buffalo, once commented in the Buffalo News about how the conditions in our country are similar to the Roman Empire prior to its collapse. Curran noted four similarities.

❶ First, he pointed out that there were economic pressures in Rome that caused the poor to feel hopeless. Inflation had made it difficult for the poor to obtain food and shelter and to survive but at the same time, the Roman government cut back on the amount of gold and silver in their coins.

The wealthy Romans were immune from inflation while the poor were shouldering overwhelming tax burdens. So when the poor ran out of money, they had to attach themselves dependently to wealthy land owners becoming slaves (or owned property) without freedom. Land became the most important commodity and it was in the hands of relatively few people – mostly senators and statespersons.

Today we know that inflation has virtually reached its peak so that the laws of supply and demand are more forcefully in effect. This means that the demand has diminished (for new cars, for instance) so the supply has dropped. Manufacturers can't afford to keep making cars we can't afford to purchase.

Yet there are still those few who seem to be immune from the high costs. They continue to shop at Lord and Taylor's and Saks of 5th Avenue and own the latest model Lexus or Mercedes vehicles without batting an eye. Others, who don't have savings accounts but struggle with their credit interest payments and taxes, are going further into their credit for even groceries. Today, we do see growing alienation between the affluent and the poor.

❷ Professor Curran says a second factor in 1st century pre-fallen Rome and today is a growing neglect of the cities. In Rome then and today in our time people dislike the meanness – the theft, vandalism and violence and so they tend to retreat to the suburbs. Prosperous neighborhoods see to it that they get all their necessities from their politicians while people living in areas zoned for industry and low-income apartments do not.

❸ A third point about our time's similarity with pre-fall Rome is that the church has concentrated on emphasizing salvation being mostly about 'getting into

heaven.' It is an emphasis on the individual "making it" with God. This focus had the attitude that the world in which we live doesn't count. Like the old Christian campground hymn goes, "this world is not my home, I'm just 'a passin' through, my treasure's all laid out, somewhere beyond the blue."¹ Centuries ago, some very talented people dropped out of society to join religious orders instead of involving themselves in civil service jobs and professional careers "of the world."

In our time, we know that some parts of the church have emphasized only heaven and the afterlife. For a couple of generations behind us, we know that some Christian leaders have preached about "getting saved" but despite the popularity of the current Left Behind series, this emphasis, on the part of the larger Christian church, has diminished.

In recent decades, the larger church has tried to bridge the gap between so-called "spiritual matters" and our every day life – trying to make our faith more practical and less "theological" or "other worldly" in nature. But even though church leaders are trying to make Christianity relate more to our every day experiences, the final frontier of our faith seems to be the business world.

The 80's and 90's of the last century saw a shift of interest away from the humanities and more into technological concerns. How we behave and respond in the realm of corporate ethics is one of the least dealt with areas for Christians today.

❹ The fourth parallel Dr. Curran saw was a change in social attitudes of Rome where patriotism became a thing of the past. Neither the wealthy nor the poor felt any reason to defend the republic.

Some groups of people who had joined the Empire were not given full citizenship and were treated like second-class citizens. There was racism, class-ism and corruption in the politics. The average person felt that nothing much could be done about anything – they felt disenfranchised by the power structure.

Today, young adults don't feel like investing their time and money into becoming public servants by heading for political offices. It is also well known, even down to the

¹ known as "Do Lord"

ages of high school students, that a career in healthcare is likely to lead to total burnout in an organization that is constantly short of funds. They see those (who are a half a generation behind them and who are working in hospitals and nursing homes) are telling stories of patients who keep pressing their call lights in vain. They hear stories that when the staff finally gets into those rooms, they not only have to deal with the patient's problems but that they're compounded by the enormous frustration of the languishing patient. It's sad to hear that our governor's solution to the plight of the nursing home is to decrease state funding in order to punish their owners for allegedly making too much money.

Church denominations know, first hand, that there is a severe shortage of clergy in the Protestant and Catholic faith expressions. For at least ten years, they've been telling seminary students that they better have a way of making a living other than the church because fewer congregations are able to afford full time salaries.

Another History professor, Thomas Goldstein, in his book on the same subject, said there's another commonality Rome had before its fall with our nation today. Before Rome fell, there was a dramatic shift of the nation's influence on the global culture. At a certain point, Rome could no longer "control" the number of nations under its military and economic power.

Roman soldiers grew tired of being out of the country, away from their families, just to keep Germany (or some other country referred to as the "barbarians") in line (as the politicians dictated).² You saw this in the recent film *Gladiator*.

Today, we see how the influence and power of our country is diminishing in the world while the populations of China, South America and India will make it so that our little nation can no longer use up two thirds of the earth's resources – no matter how many bombs we might have in storage or how much other nations want our style of clothing and merchandise.

With all that input from social and historical scientists, here's the point. What John the Baptist had to say to his first listeners was just as relevant to us.

The crowds were hearing from John that they should get serious about what they were doing with their lives. They should repent and get their lives in order. The first

² Thomas Goldstein, *Dawn of Modern Science : From the Ancient Greeks to the Renaissance* ISBN: 0306806371.

thing usually out of the mouths of the extroverts in his audiences was, "Well, what specifically are we supposed to do differently with our lives?" What do we have to know for the test?

Without hesitation, John shot back, "If you've got two coats, give one away to someone who doesn't have one." His principle was simple. It is contrary to the will of God that some people have to go without while others have more than they need. But notice that John did not pause and add, "But in the case of the poor, we all know that people are usually poor because they're lazy and just plain don't want to work." Instead, John was saying, "The bottom line is this: when someone has a need, meet that need if you can!"

In John's travels, he obviously talked to a lot of different kinds of people but Luke mentions two. One was a tax collector and the other a soldier.

The IRS agent, whose vocation caused him to go into the neighborhoods and collect taxes for the Romans, was apparently concerned about living with a balance of his personal and career ethics. He wanted to know how he could have better ethics in his career.

John said to him, "Simply collect the right amount – don't cheat.

Remember the other IRS executive, Zacchaeus? Upon his conversion to Christianity, he promised to give back all he had wrongly taken from his customers and then some. Tax collectors were notorious for taking more money than they should – they regularly abused their power. But notice that John didn't say, "If you know what's good for you, get out of that line of work and become a social worker instead." He just told him to be honest and fair.

He gave similar advice to a soldier. John said, "Don't rob anyone by violence or false accusations and live on the pay check you get from the government."

The mood of people making a living then was much as it is today. The pressures were the same.

It is the goal of every corporate board of directors and small business owner to try to make a profit. I believe that none of us should ever complain about the money we're given by our company until we experience what is involved in trying to make payroll. I have worked in several corporations in Western New York and with the high taxes, utilities, insurance and lawsuits, it actually amazes me that a company today can afford to pay employees not to work on holidays.

There is so much pressure on business owners and boards responsible for making a payroll that most of them have to retain corporate lawyers just to determine if there are some shades of the law or loopholes that might enable them to increase profits in some way. Independent Health and Blue Cross, for example, have scores of pharmacists on their staff who do nothing but research how cheaper generic drug combinations can achieve the same results as the more expensive and heavily advertised drugs. “Do more with less” all of us are told by any company in which we work. But in our company or department’s striving to shave expenses from costs, sometimes there are ethical lines that we find ourselves crossing for the sake of our company’s survival or our own commissions.

A chemist friend of ours once worked for an area chemical company. She would sit at her lab desk, thinking about the false chemical reports piled before her that her superiors expected her to sign. These reports contained falsified measurements of toxic wastes.

As soon as she saw the lies, she had to weigh her career, her salary and pension and the possibility of not obtaining another job in an already downsizing industry – against her personal integrity. She told us once that she frequently wondered if it all would be worth it. After all, what good can only one person do? One thing the Buffalo and Niagara Falls chambers of commerce don’t put in their brochures is our high cancer and heart disease rate – are our friends and relatives dying just so some of these chemical companies could make payroll?

John the Baptist was executed. Our chemist friend was fired for refusing to sign false chemistry reports. She did, however, join a group in the area which was trying to curb abuses in the chemical industry. After months of hard work, the group managed to make some modest industrial reforms. After months of anxiety for her and her family, she obtained another job but they are now living in a trailer instead of the home they once had.

And so it goes, down the line with every profession today. If people have the mentality that “nothing really matters” and if the value of economic security and success in the corporation is raised above all other social or religious values, then nothing really does matter.

So John and a few more months later, Jesus said, ‘It does matter because everyone is going to be held accountable for what they do with their lives.’ And the image John used was one of separating the chaff from the grain after harvest.

In John’s time, farmers used a large flat wooden shovel – probably something like the long-handled flat spatula used today to take pizza out of a restaurant oven. They would scoop up some of the harvested wheat, toss it in the air and fanning it on its way down if there was no wind. The heavier grain would fall down while the lighter chaff and stalks would be blown further away.

So John was talking about judgment – which he thought was like the fire that burns up the chaff pile that had been blown away from the pile of grain. If we were to stretch John’s metaphor today, we could think of people around us trying to live as if nothing matters, being “on the take”³ so to speak – blown along by the wind of what everyone else is supposedly doing. So John’s points were ① We should share with others and ② Continue in our careers which call for the use of our talents but always do what is right.

If you are in school, do the very best you can do in every subject you take. Consider the quality of your homework, your ability to participate in class discussion, your willingness to do additional work out of your own motivation. Do the little things like being on time with papers and always take another look at what you’re putting before someone as your work – own your work. The quality of what you do in all these things will be exactly like the quality you will be doing a couple of years from now when you are getting paid for what you do to make a living. It matters that you do the best you can because if you don’t, you’ll get blown along by the social trends with most other people – while others, who pay more serious attention to what they do, will fall into the position you wished you could have had.

That’s why John the Baptist spoke so bluntly to his listeners. He sensed what was ahead for the people who were simply “on the take” – living just for what they could get out of life. And that’s why your parents speak with such strong emotion about your future. They know what is ahead and they’re trying to save you from the emptiness and the dull despair of life that one experiences when they don’t do the best they can.

In exactly the same way, what you do as an adult matters. It matters that you keep trying to be a better parent – constantly trying to increase your listening skills, your communication skills and that you are “always signed up for class” in trying to learn about what your kids are experiencing. You’ve got to know what your children are feeling and what they think about what is going on in their life. Don’t let your kids live 18 years in your home and

³ or living with compromises in their ethics

have them go away, never having been asked what they think and feel!

If you don't listen to them in a way that doesn't judge what they feel; and if you don't give them the intellectual elbow room to think differently than you, you'll die never knowing your own son or daughter. It matters how good a parent you are. It retards your child's emotional and intellectual maturity for up to two decades if you are an over-judging and over-controlling parent.

If you are an employee in a business, you have to be selective about sharing some of our opinions. Because if you are always speaking your mind on issues of both great and small importance, you will be considered insubordinate by your supervisors and thought of as threatening. You might be thought of as speaking too much, considered abrasive and unproductive to the team. To maintain a balance, some self-sacrifice is needed and some compromise is necessary to build and maintain a team-like atmosphere in order to accomplish what must be produced.

Granted, these suggestions for honesty and integrity are complex in the business world. You can sense the tension as soon as you stack your Christian values up against the goals of your corporation. I think Christians in business should form study groups to discuss the pressures they face with their values clashes in their careers.

The key word in all this seems to be involvement. How involved are we with the people with whom we work? Have they ever heard your basics of belief for your ethical system of Christianity? Do we stand as different from those at work who seem to be just in it for the money or the highest position in the firm?

Slow down and take a look at a dollar bill next time you have one out. On the back side, in the top left corner, at the top of the pyramid is an eye.⁴ It is a symbol of God

⁴ The eye and the pyramid shown on the reverse side of the one-dollar bill are in the Great Seal of the United States. The Great Seal was first used on the reverse of the one-dollar Federal Reserve note in 1935. The Department of State is the official keeper of the Seal. They believe that the most accurate explanation of a pyramid on the Great Seal is that it symbolizes strength and durability. The unfinished pyramid means that the United States will always grow, improve and build. In addition, the "All-Seeing Eye" located above the pyramid suggests the importance of divine guidance in favor of the American cause. The inscription ANNUI COEPTIS translates as "He (God) has favored our undertakings," and refers to the many instances of

seeing all things that we do. Ironic, isn't it, that we put it on our money.

This is the challenge of being a Christian today. In this time in history, the prevailing winds of the social trends are blowing people along in mass. But because of our commitment to Christ and His teaching, we can more confidently settle down and try to live a life of quality. We can try to make our faith and values make a difference in how we parent, how we relate in our most intimate relationship and how we are at work. We can have a quality life because we know that what we do with ourselves, wherever we are, matters. It matters and God sees everything we do. ■



Divine Providence during addition, the inscription N as "A new order of the age If you are interested in a of the United States, you should contact the Department of State directly. [This information obtained from : http://www.centercoin.com/currency_information/FAQ/one_dollar_bill.htm

